

T H E N E W  
A D V E N T U R E S

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THE MEDUSA EFFECT

JUSTIN RICHARDS

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**'That rather depends on who wants to know.'**

**'I'd like to offer you a job. I think you'll find it interesting.'**

**'Isn't this just a little inappropriate? I mean, we're at a funeral.'**

**'That rather depends on the job.'**

Medusa - an experimental spaceship developed by the Advanced Research Department of St Oscar's University. Missing since it was launched, presumed lost in the wars, it was a project so secret that it has never been declassified.

Now, twenty years later, Medusa is coming home.

After one of the investigation team dies suspiciously, Professor Bernice Summerfield is assigned to help discover what went wrong. But to do so she must solve a riddle. What is the strange link between the original crew and the team now on board the drifting ship? And why do their ghosts still haunt Medusa?

## THE NEW ADVENTURES

**Justin Richards** is the author of the highly acclaimed New Adventure *Dragon's Breath* and the fictional 'father' of the legendary Irving Braxiatel. Back in the real world, Justin spends much - but not enough - of his time as a real father and husband. His sense of humour, however, is imported from elsewhere.

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Justin Richards

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For Alison and Julian  
And, of course, Lumpy

**PART ONE**

**INVESTIGATION**

# CHAPTER 1

*I remember my birth as if it were yesterday. The darkness held me tight, fluid, warm. Forever, I floated in a soft emptiness, devoid of memory and thought. Then, the emptiness ruptured, broke apart, and released me into the darkness of the world.*

*I was alone, caught between being and having been, between newborn-naïve and experienced-ingenue. Alone with the memories that crowded in on me, brought me down, screamed for a share of my attention. My life.*

*And then the wall cracked open like an egg, and they came for me.*

On the main island of St Oscar's University on Dellah stands the Advanced Research Department. In many ways it is out of keeping with the rest of the university. While St Oscar's is generally open and public with its research and academic work, the Advanced Research Department is a closed, secretive environment. While the university sprawls over several islands and is housed largely in what seem to be archaic and ill-appointed buildings, the ARD is a single concentrated group of facilities, purpose-built and fairly modern. While most departments of the university scabble for funding and beg for budget, the ARD has never been short of sponsors. Anyone can visit St Oscar's - its doors are open. The ARD is hidden behind a large black wall. The only entrance is through enormous black gates guarded by huge Goll sentries. Nobody who doesn't work there or sponsor the work is ever permitted beyond those gates.

So extreme are the differences in perspective and culture that most denizens of St Oscar's no longer acknowledge the ARD at all. Even Bernice Summerfield, Professor of Archaeology, had got to the point where she passed the wall



and the gates without even noticing they were there. She rode past on her augmented bicycle, her newly completed Mark 2 as she thought of it. She was trying out a new short cut in the hope of making up some time as she raced towards another late lecture, barely sparing a glance on the two Goll guards either side of the gates into the ARD.

Perhaps, if she had been given an inkling of what was happening inside at that moment, and of how it would affect her in the days ahead, she might have paused. She might have slowed, or even stopped, stared thoughtfully at the glossy blackness of the wall and seen a dark reflection of herself looking back. She might have moved her arm, just a little, to see if the reflection responded, to see if she could cheat the image, just a little. Then perhaps she would have shaken her head, decided not to get involved no matter how tempting the proposition might be made to sound, and cycled on content to keep the memory of her reflection neatly in its appointed place inside her head.

But she had no inkling, and she did not stop.

‘Yes, I have it too.’ The operator on duty was Gilles Slavich. He shared shifts with the Octopods in the Surveillance Suite of the Advanced Research Department to augment the salary he pulled for work on a sensitive project funded by an off-world consortium. *Sensitive*, of course, meant military. There had been a time, although Slavich did not know it, when military work had been shunned by the ARD. There had been a time, during the war, when Dellah had been neutral and St Oscar’s had done everything in its power to preserve that neutrality. That neutrality was thought to be the price of Dellah’s survival, the way it stayed unnoticed and insignificant while the galaxy around it crumbled and burnt.

The people drawn to St Oscar’s and to the fledgling ARD in particular had largely been drawn by the appeal of peace, by the notion of a safe haven of altruistic research in the midst of a sea of blood and fury. The fact that the neutrality really meant nothing to the forces pushing forward into human

space, and that Dellah escaped the ravages of war by luck and insignificance rather than prudence or status, did not shake their resolve.

But Gilles Slavich had no such qualms, and his only moral problem was that even *sensitive* work didn't pay enough to feed some of his more expensive habits.

He leant closer and stared at the transponder signal on the edge of his scope. He had not been scanning anything like that far out into space when the call came in from the main spaceport. They had a signal, faint but readable. And the only data they had attached to that transponder code was a note to call the ARD if it ever showed up. It was one of theirs.

'Thanks,' Slavich told the spaceport operator. 'I'll check out the ident codes and get back to you if we need anything else.' He closed the link, zoomed the image, and started a string-search for the transponder code.

Taffeta Graize was working at her desk. So many projects to coordinate, so much work to wade through. And a major complication to sort out. But for that she had plenty of time, long enough to work through contingency plans.

The direct line bleeped insistently, daring her to ignore the call. Graize exhaled heavily in annoyance. 'Yes, what is it?'

The face was not one she knew. The name - Slavich - was not one she recognized. 'I'm sorry to disturb you, madam,' the young man - boy, almost - stammered.

'Then why have you?'

'I'm duty officer in the Surveillance Suite, madam.'

'Fascinating. So what are you surveying?'

'A ship, madam. On the edges of our sector. It seems to be drifting slowly in this direction. It will take weeks to get to a point where it can be reached by shuttle. The main facility at the spaceport called through and -'

'Get to the point,' Graize snapped, cutting him off. 'Why should I be at all interested in some drifting space garbage?'

Slavich gulped visibly. 'It's got your name on it, Miss Graize. I mean, the transponder ident is data-linked to a note saying to contact you immediately should this ship show up.'

Taffeta Graize leant back in her chair. She felt suddenly slightly light-headed. Perhaps she had less time for contingency planning than she thought. 'This ship,' she heard herself ask the boy on surveillance, 'does it have a name listed?'

He nodded, eager to please. 'Yes. Yes it does. Right by the note to call you.'

'Well?'

'*Medusa*, Miss Graize. The ship is called *Medusa*.'

She broke the link without a word. If he was expecting thanks, he could think again. She stared down at the screen set into her desk, but she saw nothing. In her mind's eye, in the mists of her memory, a huge sleek ship lifted majestically towards the cloudy skies of Dellah, angling up over the needle point of the launch gantry. So, after all this time, after twenty years, *Medusa* was finally coming home.

The sign had been handwritten with a chunky marker pen. It was in anonymous capital letters, out of order, please use the stairs. It had been taped beside the elevator doors, so that it hung over the call button. Maryann Decleiter looked at it, puzzled. She read it again. There was an arrow drawn underneath the text, pointing to the service door to the side of the lift. Maryann could not recall ever having used the stairs before. She was not even sure that she had known there were any.

She pushed the door open with difficulty. It was heavy, the hinges rusted as if it had not been used for years. Surely she was not the first person to have to use this diversion. The stairwell was almost in darkness. A single orange security light over the door threw shadows down the steps and left the central shaft a square black hole.

'Terrific,' Maryann breathed. The door banged shut behind her. There was a dreadful finality about the sound, and she turned instinctively to see the last line of light reappear for a split second as the door bounced slightly open again. Then it closed completely and the light was gone. The shadows behind the door seemed somehow deeper than the others, as

if a black figure were standing there, soaking up the light. Maryann Declleiter shivered and turned away.

Her foot was on the edge of the top step, her attention on her feet and the chipped concrete climb to the next floor. A hand closed over her mouth, cutting off the inchoate cry, dragging her backward, bending her over, forcing her towards the stairs descending to the floor below. She struggled and fought, trying to bite at the hand over her face, trying to kick out at the legs of the man. Then suddenly he was gone; she was free. And she was falling. She bounced off the side of the stairwell, and crashed headlong downward. Her face cracked into the edge of a step as she cartwheeled. The blackness rushing up at her might have been the bottom of the stairs.

'I know she was a friend of yours.' Taffeta Graize's grief was evident in her expression. 'I thought you would want to see.'

'Thank you.' Commander Skutloid nodded. He regarded the human woman through the thick red blast screens set into his face. His race had long since abandoned the ceremonial helmets of his ancestors. Now the armour was built directly into the body, as were the weapons systems and surveillance. An implant at the back of his brain held the central processor; the electrical impulses from his own body - from his nervous system - powered the CPU and the systems. He breathed heavily. The air was filtered through an artificial membrane crafted into his throat, the nitrogen he needed allowed to pass through, the impurities rejected.

The staircase was lit by powerful halogen lamps mounted on thin metal stands. A chalked shape at the bottom resembled the human form, as if drawn by a child round a template. The steps gave the shape a jagged edge.

'You are investigating?' Skutloid rasped.

Graize nodded. 'It is a purely internal matter, you understand. But yes, we are investigating.' She smiled thinly. 'I have to say that our investigations so far indicate that she tripped and fell. There is no reason to suppose otherwise.'

'Of course not.' As head of the Strategic Institute, Commander Skutloid was one of the few outsiders to be

invited on occasion into the Advanced Research Department. Given the nature of some of the work going on there, they often needed the specialist facilities and expertise he and his team could provide. It was by chance that he had been at the ARD today. But he was still an outsider, and he could not afford to make trouble. Better to wait, to let the investigation run its course and decide for himself if there was more to this business than had been uncovered.

So Skutloid did not ask why Maryann Decleiter had taken the stairs. He did not suggest that there was some hidden purpose in her decision not to use the elevator, but to resort to a musty, forgotten service passage instead. He knew that Taffeta Graize would be asking herself, and her security team, the same questions. Unless they already knew the answer. But Skutloid was content, for now, to bide his time and not to ask.

He nodded to Graize as he left, but he did not offer any further thanks for the chance to see where his friend had died. Nor did he mention to her the hair's-breadth sliver of adhesive tape that his augmented vision had detected sticking to the panel above the elevator call button.

When Bernice Summerfield was feeling particularly happy or at one with the world, she read the obituaries. There was something about the inevitability of death, about the loss of others, about the roll call of half-recognised names that put things into perspective. If she was feeling at all gloomy, then the litany of loss was a definite downer. But it could be a sobering caution, a demonstration of how a whole life, often a life of academic worth not unlike the one she craved for herself, could be assimilated and expressed in a couple of short paragraphs. It was an indication of just how little it really mattered if she cocked up one lecture or was late for another.

St Oscar's newspaper was called *Graduated Feedback* - a witty nomenclature which had won the competition to find a title when it was first set up, narrowly beating *Have A Banana* into second place largely because most students and staff had no idea what a banana was and therefore didn't

think it was at all funny. The format of the paper was such that deciding whether or not to read the obituaries, and to catch up on those you had missed, was straightforward. Benny had a profile, in effect a list of subject areas in which she was interested, and a set of key words to search for within articles. From this list, which she could change whenever she wanted, was compiled an issue of the paper. It would contain all the relevant stories and articles since Benny last asked for a copy, or for the past two months if it had been longer than that. The final decision Benny had to make was the delivery medium. She could have it printed like an old-fashioned newspaper, or routed to any screen she could access, or have it read to her at bedtime. Usually, she printed it. Never did she have it read to her.

So it was that she found herself one lecture-less afternoon - too late for a lunchtime bevvv; too early for an evening session - lying in a rare space on the floor of her apartment leafing through a broadsheet printout. Being generally happy with the world (not having been almost killed for several weeks, a lack of strange alien menaces to deal with for the past month, no marking outstanding), Benny was whistling. She had included the obituaries in her wish list of topics and was scanning through the three paragraphs of the life of Hirtana Jyrista, former lecturer in quantum media. She wondered vaguely how he had managed to live so long if that was all he got up to, and moved on to the next entry.

*Maryann Declleiter.* Benny stared. There was an image, but for once Benny did not tilt the paper in an attempt to see how far round the holographic head she could see and whether the earlobes were visible at all. Instead, she examined the face. It was a young woman, about Benny's age though with long fair hair rather than Benny's shorter dark cut. She had worked at the Advanced Research Department, and died in some sort of accident — a fall. Benny had never seen the woman before in her life, but somehow the name seemed familiar. So did the brief account of her work in applied tachyonics and energy-field manipulation.

Benny rolled over, and sat up. She leant back, crossing her legs beneath her, and stared at the picture again. Then she reread the article. After that, she got up, walked once round the room, looked at the picture again, but upside down this time, and then meandered towards the kitchen. She sat down again, found that somehow she had a glass of wine in her hand, frowned, thought, What the hell? and took a tentative sip.

Then she remembered where she had heard the name.

The invitation had not made it clear what was being celebrated, and Irving Braxiatel had been just as vague when Benny asked him. It had been a couple of months previously, perhaps longer.

As parties went, Benny had been to wilder. But few had been as refined, dignified, or fun. Her abiding memories of the evening were of the entertainment. Staff and students at the Theatrology Department, of which Braxiatel was the head, had staged a series of scenes and sequences from Shakespeare in the atrium of the department building. The setting was an impressive cathedral of glass and marble.

The guests had arranged themselves along the various balconies overlooking the main foyer and looked down on the players as they performed their act without costume changes, props or scenery. The idea, Braxiatel had whispered to her, was that the power of the performers themselves and of the language was sufficient. For those who understood it.

As the performance ended, not having seemed to last anything like the two hours that it had held the guests enthralled, drinks and food were served. Benny looked round for Braxiatel, since she doubted she would know many other people. She caught sight of him at last, talking enthusiastically with a human. Each was holding a glass of champagne. They seemed to be having an animated but amicable discussion. Braxiatel was a tall man, which made his companion seem shorter than he probably was. While Braxiatel was clean-shaven, his guest had a neat dark beard which compensated for his nearly-bald head. He was dressed

in a simple suit, though he looked somehow uncomfortable in it.

Benny watched them for a few moments. There was something odd about the way Braxiatel was conducting himself: somehow his attitude towards the man seemed different from the way he spoke with most people. It took her a while to work out what it was. Then she frowned. Braxiatel was being deferential to the man, actually listening to him and nodding as if the other man had made a valid, valuable and interesting point.

At one stage, the man turned slightly, enough that he was facing directly towards Benny. And in that instant she was sure that she knew him, had seen his face somewhere before. At the same moment, she became aware of a large figure standing beside her offering a glass. As she took the champagne flute, Benny meant to say, 'Thank you.' What she actually said was, 'Who is that?'

'Braxiatel?'

'No, no. The other man.'

'I have no idea, Professor Summerfield.' The voice was soft but slightly husky. The middle of *Professor* and start of *Summerfield* seemed stressed, seemed to stretch longer than the rest of her name. 'I asked the same thing of Braxiatel during the performance. The man seemed most attentive, though a little confused.'

Benny turned to look at her new companion. She did not know him; she was sure they had never met. She had a good memory for huge green reptilian aliens. Especially ones from Neo Aries. He was about seven feet high, red screens shielding his eyes, set directly into his wrinkled face. He wore a dark ceremonial cloak, lined in scarlet satin, over his armoured torso. The gunmetal-grey armour was grafted on to his body. His arms ended in stubby hands from which large, sharp claws emerged. Despite their apparent clumsiness, Benny knew they were quite dextrous. If she had not known this before, the fact that he was drinking champagne from a thin-stemmed, cut-crystal flute would have been more than adequate proof.



‘So, what did Braxiatel say?’ she asked.

‘He said I would never believe him.’ The reptile coughed, his equivalent of a laugh. ‘Which is probably true, assuming I had understood him.’

‘And how do you know my name?’

‘Forgive me.’ He seemed to know at once what she was really asking. She guessed that Braxiatel had pointed her out. ‘I am Commander Skutloid.’ He saluted her formally, right fist thumping against his upper left breastplate. ‘I am head of the Institute of Strategic Studies here at St Oscar’s.’

Benny shook his claw, her small hand lost inside its warm mass. ‘And you know Irving Braxiatel well?’ she asked.

Skutloid coughed again. ‘I doubt anyone knows him well. But we have been acquaintances, perhaps even friends, for many years. I knew him before I took up the post here, back in my days of glory.’ His head shifted slightly, as if he were staring off into the distance of memory. ‘I have been privileged to be able to offer my services to Braxiatel on several occasions since coming here. On one occasion, I remember,’ Skutloid continued, ‘he asked me about the Gamalian Gambit.’

‘Ah.’ Benny nodded. That made sense. Probably Skutloid had watched the Stanturus Inquiry where she and Braxiatel had shared the limelight. He would remember her from that.

Their conversation moved on. They discussed the evening’s performance; they spoke about Braxiatel. They compared notes on their experiences on and impressions of Dellah and St Oscar’s. They talked about people they knew, shared friends.

‘Do you know anyone at the Advanced Research Department?’ Skutloid asked at one point.

Benny shook her head. ‘You’re kidding,’ she said. ‘They all have three arms and two heads in there, or so I hear. Do you know any of them?’

He nodded slowly. ‘I have occasion to work with some of the people and projects there. They sometimes have need, given the nature of some of the research work, for my expertise and experience.’

'I bet.' Benny's tone betrayed her feelings.

'I appreciate your point of view,' Skutloid said. 'Mostly they are interested only in the devices of death. Not in honour, or glory. Or justice.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean -'

Skutloid held up his hand. 'Only when you have seen death, when you have stood with it face to face, should one be permitted to enter into a pact with it. Yet some of them in there deal with Diabolis himself, and have no interest in the reasons of war - the honour, the glory, the cause. Without a cause, a just cause, war is but murder writ large.' He drew a deep rasping breath. 'I feel strongly too on this matter. If I did not, I think our friend Braxiatel would have found someone else to help with his own projects.'

'Projects?'

He waved her comment away. 'No matter. I was going to ask if you knew Maryann Decleiter? No? She works in the Advanced Research Department. Her expertise is in space drives, in tachyonics and energy fields.'

Benny shook her head. The name meant nothing to her.

'She is like you in many ways. Or you, perhaps, are like her. You share a sense of purpose, and a sense of humour. There is a similarity in your bearing, in your style of speech and deportment. Of course,' Skutloid coughed, 'you may look quite different. But to me, you will appreciate, all humans look very much the same.'

Benny smiled. She knew it was a joke. And for a Neo Arietian, it was a good one.

The wineglass was still full in her hand, Benny realized. She had been staring off into space, remembering that evening, recalling that first conversation with Commander Skutloid. She thought back to his comments on Maryann Decleiter, to his description of her and his observation that they should meet - that Benny and Maryann would be kindred spirits. And Benny had promised she would give Maryann a call, or drop her a note. Whatever.

But now she was dead. Gone. And Benny would never meet her, would never know this kindred spirit if indeed that was what she had been. She felt a tightening at the back of her throat, a fullness behind the eyes. Tiny droplets of red jumped out of the full glass and ran down its edges as a single tear splashed into the wine.

The ceremony was a simple, nondenominational affair. It was a wet afternoon on one of the tiny islands in the Gerondo Strait, a main waterway between several of the larger islands on which St Oscar's was situated. The air was misty damp, the drizzle seeping through Benny's coat and into the material of her dark suit. It seemed to condense on her hat and then run off the brim, dripping down in front of her face.

There was a light breeze and, in a peculiar quirk of meteorology, it blew the mist into swirls and patterns. Benny was standing at the back of the rows of people watching as the small casket containing the remains of Maryann Decler was lowered gently on thick white ribbons into a hole in the sandy ground. The voice of the officiator carried easily through the mist, enhanced by a tiny throat microphone.

'And so we commend to eternity the worldly remains of our dear departed colleague. May she rest in peace.' He held his fist out, knuckles up, over the grave. Then he opened his hand, and a trickle of earth fell from it into the grave. Benny could imagine it slapping on to the casket, diluted by the rain and running in dirty rivulets over the edge and into the ground.

The rows of mourners started to thin out as people drifted away. A series of ferries were waiting to carry them back through the mist to the main islands. But Benny waited, watched the grave, let the others file past her quietly as Commander Skutloid raked the soil in over the casket containing the remains of his friend.

'Bernice Summerfield?' The voice was close by her ear, quiet but firm. A woman's voice.

'That rather depends on who wants to know.' Benny did not look round. She kept watching Skutloid as, his job

completed, he stepped back from the grave and saluted stiffly. Then he bowed his head, stood absolutely still.

The woman's voice was calm, but laced with authority. 'I'd like to offer you a job,' she said. And this time Benny did turn. 'I think you'll find it interesting.'

The woman appeared to be older than Benny, though she could have been almost any age. She was dressed in a black suit, but the hair that touched her shoulders was a striking blonde, almost bleached. It was cut into a perfect frame for her oval face. Her eyes were livid green, alive with inner intensity.

Benny cocked her head slightly to one side. 'Isn't this just a little inappropriate?' she asked. 'I mean, we're at a funeral.'

The woman smiled. Or at least, her mouth curled up slightly at the edges. The eyes were unchanged. 'That rather depends on the job,' she said quietly. 'Have you ever heard of *Medusa*?'

Benny nodded. 'Of course. She was an ancient goddess who turned people to stone if they looked at her. Snakes for hair, you know. The usual. Friend of yours?'

The woman continued to smile. 'Ancient history,' she said. 'Myth. I had something a bit more recent in mind.'

'Oh yeah? Well, I have a job already, thanks.' Benny turned to follow the last of the mourners. 'And ancient history is what it's all about.'

'Taffeta Graize.' The woman caught Benny's arm as she turned. 'I work at the Advanced Research Department. I was Maryann's boss, in fact.'

'I never met her,' Benny said quietly. 'But I'm sorry.'

Graize waved her comment aside. 'I'd have offered Maryann the job. Her expertise overlapped with yours somewhat.'

'I thought she was into tachyonics.'

'Amongst other things. Her interest in the past was not as far-reaching as your own. But she knew something about *Medusa*. Our *Medusa*.'

'And what exactly was *your Medusa* when it was at home?'

'Home,' Graize said quietly. 'Yes, an interesting thought.' She clicked her tongue in what might have been amusement.

‘Perhaps that’s it. *Medusa* was an experimental ship we – that is the ARD - launched twenty years ago.’

‘So?’

‘So we lost it. Never heard of again.’

‘Careless of you.’

Taffeta Graize shrugged. ‘Perhaps. There was a war on after all.’

‘So, what about it?’

‘It has shown up on the long-range scanners.’ She stared into Benny’s eyes, the intensity of her gaze making Benny look aside. We don’t know where she’s been, or what has happened to her or to her crew, but *Medusa*, finally, is coming home.’

‘And what do you want me to do about it?’

This time her smile seemed completely genuine. She handed Benny a business card. ‘Oh, I want you to find out what happened. For someone who uncovers the events of past centuries — millennia even - twenty years should present little problem.’ She tapped her long fingernail on the face of the card as Benny held it. ‘Call me,’ she said. Then she turned and headed for the nearest ferry.

Benny looked down at the card. It told her nothing of interest she did not already know - a name and contact details, but no hint of a job description or position.

Skutloid’s whisper made Benny flinch with surprise. ‘I can hear the fall of a sparrow at over a hundred yards.’

‘You mean you were listening in?’

‘I hope you don’t mind. I wondered if you already knew Taffeta Graize. It did not seem a good match, somehow.’

‘She offered me a job.’

‘I know. Will you take it?’ Skutloid took Benny’s elbow and gently led her towards the last ferry. The mist swirled round them like smoke from a cauldron.

‘I don’t know. It seems a bit odd. Out of place.’

He stopped, turned, looked down into her eyes. His own were masks of red plastic. ‘Take it. It is a bizarre coincidence at such an occasion for her to make the offer, to know and recognize you. It is a coincidence that *Medusa* is returning

now, and that Maryann was destined perhaps to be involved in some way. Don't you think?'

'You think there's more to this than is being let on, don't you?' Benny challenged as they resumed their progress towards the ferry.

Skutloid nodded. 'The death is, to my mind, suspicious. And as for the coincidence...'

'There are a lot of coincidences,' Benny admitted.

Skutloid helped her into the boat, steadying her as it swayed slightly under the new weight. 'We have a mutual friend,' he told her, 'who would say there is no such thing as coincidence. On that basis alone we should investigate further.'

The ferryman pushed the boat out into the Strait. In a moment the shore was lost beneath the mist and they were alone in the middle of a grey void. 'So where do we start?' Benny asked.

Skutloid leant forward in the boat. The breeze whipped at his cloak so that it billowed out behind him. 'Let me tell you,' he hissed, 'what I know about *Medusa*.'

\* \* \*

*They taught you to be tough, at the Centre. Not just physically, but mentally too. Taught you that a mistake was something to learn from, but not to admit to. You had to be tough, to be sure of yourself, to hold your own there. I held my own. I might not have been as popular as some of the cadets, might not have been as quick to learn. But I got my commission. I showed them. I proved myself.*

*It was like school, in that sense. Against the odds - almost out of spite, I guess -I did it. No matter how they tried to hold me back, despite the prejudice about my background, I made it through. I never doubted myself, never for a moment thought I might not make it through the training. I could take it. I didn't mind the beatings, or the shouts of abuse. I didn't mind Forbeson grinding my face into the playground, or Geffries hounding me round the assault course. I showed them all. There was never a day when I wasn't certain of my own value*

*and potential. I thrived in that environment of competition and challenge.*

*There was not a day when I didn't lie to myself tell myself it would be all right. But all the time I knew I wouldn't get through, prayed that my father would take me away from school; that I would be dismissed from the Centre at the next checkpoint.*

*I hated everyone there. They were all better than me. Smarter, quicker, richer, better. And I hated myself. There is no dishonour in admitting a mistake, in being seen to learn from it. None. Yet I never once did. I had to be perfect, had to be right.*

*And they hated me for it as much as I hated myself. Hate myself still.*

*Whoever I am. Whenever I am that whoever-I-am.*

## CHAPTER 2

There was an unreal quality to the air. The journey in the ferry was a timeless, surreal experience. The boat seemed not to be moving, but rather the mist faded and swirled around it. The ferryman sat behind Benny and Skutloid, stoically ignoring them, concentrating on pushing the boat through the water with the old-fashioned oars. The rhythm of the wood on the water, the slap-splash, beat a constant measure. The only indication that time was moving forward at all.

The damp clung to Benny, eating through her clothes. She could see the condensation glistening on Skutloid's cold, dark armour plating. Only the visors over his eyes never seemed to cloud over - the undoubted product of years of research and experimentation on Neo Aries.

Commander Skutloid's voice was entirely in keeping with the surroundings. It was a gentle whisper that was easily audible above the lapping of the water and the breath of the breeze. But it was not intrusive, not the harsh rasp that his race could conjure up when they spoke with authority or dispensed military orders. 'I had not yet come to Dellah when *Medusa* was launched.' The word *Medusa* seemed custom-built for Skutloid's sibilant tones - he seemed almost to linger on it, to stroke it. 'I was still leading my battalions to glory. And death. The war touched everything, everyone. Everything except Dellah. This was a sea of calm in the eye of the storm. They treasured their neutrality, depended on it for survival. Just as now we preserve the knowledge and experience that the rest of the galaxy has lost. And by keeping it, letting it out a little at a time, so it preserves us.'

'And *Medusa* was a ship?'

Skutloid nodded. 'An experimental ship. There was much publicity at the time. About the launch, not the experiment. It was a cruise liner, I believe, modified for... something.'



‘For what?’

‘That I don’t know. As I say, it was before my time. And I don’t think all of the records have ever been made public. Which is itself suspicious,’ he went on. ‘Twenty years, and no declassification. Doubly strange for a project that would have been entirely civilian.’

‘I thought there was a war on. Surely a military project would explain why it’s been kept secret all this time.’

Skutloid thought for a moment. A thin green tongue licked his thin green lips, darting out for a second, then withdrawing. ‘One of Dellah’s ironies,’ he said at last, ‘perhaps the greatest irony, is that now we have peace of a sort, the Advanced Research Department of St Oscar’s does research into weaponry and munitions. During the war, that was absolutely taboo. There was no rule as such, but there was a bond between everyone here. It was built on the knowledge that survival came only from absolute and indisputable neutrality. And even then survival was by no means guaranteed. Nobody in the ARD would have contemplated military research, no matter what the potential rewards. It was a haven for those who wished to escape the war, those scientists and thinkers at the forefront of their art who wanted to deploy their skills for civilian purposes, for peace.’

The session in Irving Braxiatel’s study was possibly even more surreal. It was the following morning. Benny had called Taffeta Graize and left a message that she would be interested in learning more about her proposal. Now Benny and Commander Skutloid sat in Braxiatel’s large study.

Quite what was the most bizarre was difficult to pin down. Perhaps it was a combination of things. Braxiatel’s study was furnished as if it had been plucked from eighteenth-century France, then fitted with the necessary accoutrements of a modern office - fibre-optic connections, infrared receivers and transmitters, paintings that looked like original artwork but which were actually composed of tiny liquid crystals. They could shift to present a new painting or the output from a

computer or communications device at a split second's notice. Benny and Skutloid sat in low armchairs, drinking tea from ornate china cups. Benny sipped delicately and carefully at her tea, while Skutloid held his cup firmly clamped in his massive fist. Braxiatel sat at his desk.

The wall in front of them had been almost covered by a huge painting by Turner of ships in a battle. The colours were vivid, unreal. But now the tarnished gold of the ornate plaster frame surrounded not a painting but a news report. The video footage showed a huge space liner standing ready on the launch pad.

The sound on the broadcast was muted, and instead Braxiatel spoke over the footage. 'Twenty years ago,' he said as he leant back in the leather-upholstered captain's chair behind his desk, swinging to and fro and aiming a remote control vaguely at the screen, '*Medusa* was launched. She was a converted cruise liner, brought down to dry dock at the Advanced Research Department of St Oscar's and refitted. An expensive and important experiment.'

On the screen, the massive ship spouted flame and smoke. It lifted slightly on its mooring, then paused before slowly, ponderously, rising towards the heavens on a tail of fire.

'I've set a search spider to work gleaning what it can from the public and the not-so-public records available. It will take a while to get everything useful, but we can already get an overview that will probably suffice.'

'So we know what *Medusa* was all about?' Benny asked. 'We know what the ARD was telling the public at the time. And so far it's borne out in the private records and data. Whether there's more to it than they were saying, we'll have to wait and see.'

'And we may never know,' Skutloid pointed out.

'Indeed.' Braxiatel took a sip of tea, raising his cup to the screen as he indicated the schematic drawings of *Medusa* now displayed. 'Here's the construction blueprints given to the spaceport maintenance unit that did most of the work. They erased them after that work, as per their contract of

course. Fortunately they didn't delete them terribly well, and we are able to reconstruct most of the information they had.'

'And?'

'And, Benny, it matches what we already know.'

'Which is what, exactly? If you don't mind me asking.'

Braxiatel flicked the screen off, and turned to face his guests. The lighting returned slowly to a normal daytime level. '*Medusa* was a test ship. The work the spaceport did was mainly concerned with ripping out the control systems. The ship was fully automated, and controlled remotely from a ground station, here on Dellah. In fact, there was no advanced technology on board at all. The notion seems to have been to return to a bygone age of pleasure cruising with the crew entirely concerned with making the experience pleasurable for the passengers.'

'That doesn't sound too radical,' Benny said. 'Why the big deal?'

'Partly the distances and precision of guidance and control involved. Partly, I think from reading between the lines, the ARD saw this as a genuine commercial opportunity. The idea was that this would be a high-publicity proving flight. If there was enough interest they could use *Medusa* as the first in a fleet of luxury cruisers which could all be controlled remotely. Good pilots and trained crews were at a premium during the war, and therefore highly expensive. Yet people were now getting back into the mood as the war dragged on, and back into the income bracket, to afford luxury holidays.'

'And what better way to have a good time than on a luxury liner, rather than taking a vacation on some pleasure planet that you find out after you arrive was blasted to rubble last week?' Benny nodded. 'I see what you mean.'

'So what,' Skutloid asked, 'went wrong?'

'An excellent question. There was considerable publicity about the launch. Not least as there seems to have been some sort of incident involving some of the research team. The details are vague, but there were rumours of a fatal accident of some sort. Maybe it was a deliberate rumour to fuel the interest - we'll have to wait and see what the spider

turns up on that. There was a skeleton crew and a few invited passengers, all scientists or experts of some sort from the ARD in fact, though from outside the immediate research team.'

Braxiatel turned back to the screen, which had been a grey nothingness. He pointed the remote control, and it sprang back into colour. A face appeared on the screen, a middle-aged man with a stubbly beard and deep-set eyes. His dark hair was slicked back and receding. Text scrolled by the picture so fast that Benny could not read it.

'This is Kallis Shaw,' Braxiatel said. 'Captain of the *Medusa*. Barely made it through the training centre for pilots during the early days of the war. Ended up here on Dellah. In fact he got such a good letter of commendation from his commanding officer that one can only assume they were desperate to get rid of him.'

The picture changed to show a woman. She looked about Benny's age, and had long dark hair. Her features were narrow, aquiline, and her eyes were a deep blue. 'Martia Lupis, chief steward. Frighteningly efficient judging by her record.' The screen changed again, this time to show a young man. His face was pockmarked and his brown hair was lank and greasy. 'Miles Betton,' Braxiatel said. 'New to the job of steward, it would seem. Keen, but probably naive.'

Next Braxiatel showed them the passengers. Vasco Playdon he described as 'officious, a project manager, whatever that means'. He looked angry in his picture, an older man who resented something. Anni Goranson was also about Benny's age. 'Witty and intelligent. A quantum physicist.' The oldest of the group was Rathbone Quarrel. He had a grey moustache, and looked decidedly dapper. 'A gentleman of the old school, by all accounts. Brilliant in his field, which was the history of luxury cruisers in general and the old Jarrard line in particular.'

Skutloid nodded slowly at this. 'They knew how to build ships,' he remembered. 'I was transported on a commandeered Jarrard cruiser when I was a subaltern. Even after being used as a troop ship for a month the decor and

the sheer extravagance of the furnishings and accessories was incredible.'

Bettyana Quist was the last and the most striking of the passengers. She looked to be in her early twenties, with long blonde hair perfectly curled into flowing locks. Her eyes were pale blue, and her make-up expertly emphasized the considerable good points of her features. 'An astrophysicist,' Braxiatel said without elaborating. 'What you see is what you get.'

'So what happened to them all?'

'The key question.' Braxiatel helped himself to more tea. 'Contact was lost with *Medusa* soon after she took off. A matter of a couple of days out, suddenly nothing. All the remote systems lost their hold on her signal. Communications packed in. There was no on-board technology apart from the communications and life-support worth mentioning, so they couldn't have done much to help themselves.'

'So where did they go?' Skutloid asked.

'Who knows? When the remote systems lost contact, they were out of scanner range. Scout ships sent out in pursuit found no trace of *Medusa* along the projected flight path. Actually, if we backtrack along the elliptical course the ship is now taking back to us, we can see that it probably veered off track soon after contact was lost. Maybe at the same time, and for the same reason.'

'And the people on board?'

'I think that's part of what Taffeta Graize wants you to find out. There is a chance they are still alive.'

'You're kidding,' Benny laughed. 'After twenty years?'

'If the hydroponics and life-support kept operating after whatever happened, then there's no reason they couldn't have survived. Apart from being rescued by someone else. And each other, of course.'

'How do you mean?'

Braxiatel smiled. 'Imagine spending twenty years with that lot.' He waved a hand at the screen, even though it was now

blank again. 'As Sartre somewhat optimistically observed, "*L'enfer, c'est les autres*".'

'Indeed.' Benny decided she didn't want to pursue this.

'So, Benny, tell us what Graize is up to.'

Benny settled back in her armchair. 'OK. So far as I can tell, she genuinely wants to know what happened on and to *Medusa*. She's put together a team to go on board before the ship gets within sight of Dellah and the media catch on. She says she aims to keep it low-key and wants the answers before the press and public get too interested. Certainly it'll be easier to find out what happened if we get there before the vid-cameramen start crawling all over it messing things about and destroying the evidence.'

'And your role?' Skutloid asked.

'She wants an archaeologist along to piece together the clues of the past twenty years, she says. It makes sense. It's a skill the rest of her team lack.'

'And who else is on this team?'

'I don't really know,' Benny admitted. 'But I get to meet them this afternoon.'

The main gates were almost white as they reflected the afternoon sun. Their glossy black surfaces glistened and shone, so that the two Goll guards were almost lost in the radiance. Benny approached cautiously, trying not to look out of place, trying not to draw undue attention to herself.

The Golls watched her the whole way along the path. They knew exactly where she was headed and, she felt, exactly who she was and what she was about.

'Professor Bernice Summerfield,' Benny announced as she reached them. Her voice was loud with nerves. 'I have an appointment with Taffeta Graize.'

Neither of the Golls said anything by way of acknowledgment. Eventually one of them turned and looked down at Benny. Then the Goll pulled a small communicator from her top pocket and spoke into it. Her voice was a guttural mumble. She listened for a response through an earpiece. Then turned away.

Benny almost called out, but then she realized the Golls were moving away from the gates. A moment later the huge gates swung slowly, ponderously, open. The sunlight angled off them, and they became opaque again, jet-black. Benny smiled at the Golls, and stepped through the opening gap into the Advanced Research Department.

The image on the screen was from a security camera high up on the inside of the wall. The image was zoomed close in on Benny, and computer-enhanced. There was a slight choppiness to the movement as Benny walked towards the main reception area, but the edges of the figure were a sharp recommendation for the anti-aliasing software.

Taffeta Graize watched as Benny reached the reception area. The system was keyed to Benny's bioprint now, slotted to her pheromones and tracking her heat signature, so the image switched to the camera concealed in the reception desk as Benny entered. The effect was disorientating, a switch from the high angle down at Benny's retreating figure to a low shot looking up at her as she approached.

'I think she will do very well,' Graize said to the man next to her.

The glow from the monitor flickered across Styryus Kirk's broken face like firelight. His nose was bent almost into an elbow, it had been broken so many times. His eyes were sunken, with black rims. His strikingly red hair was a brutal crew cut. A thin, white, ancient scar ran like milk from the left edge of his mouth down the contour of his chin where a Dethak laserblade had long ago gone astray en route to his throat. His voice was a tortured rasp from the Dethak's second thrust.

'She should be ideal, according to the query we ran against the university database,' Kirk said. It sounded as if every syllable was forced out with a supreme effort and extreme pain. 'Once she's had the medical treatment, she will be as good as Decleiter would have been.'

'I doubt it.' Graize did not look away from the screen. 'Decleiter was trained and prepared over several years for

this. Summerfield is a wild card, though in the data the match really is extraordinary, I grant you.'

'Not that it matters.' Kirk coughed suddenly, as if he had caught his breath. It was a dry sound like sticks breaking underfoot. 'She's really there to make up the numbers.'

'Not quite true,' Graize admonished. On the screen, a man was approaching Benny as she waited in the reception area. Taffeta Graize smiled and nodded. Then she switched off the screen and turned to Kirk. 'There is always a chance,' she said, 'that Professor Summerfield will actually be able to find out for us what happened on *Medusa*.'

She took a moment to adjust as the man held out his left hand. 'Heath Chromsky.' He shook Benny's hand firmly. He was middle-aged and had not fared well. His face seemed to be permanently set in a frown beneath his high forehead. I'm the commanding officer for the *Medusa* mission.'

'Great.' Benny smiled at him. He frowned back. After a moment, Chromsky turned and walked away. Benny followed him. 'Great, *sir*.' she considered under her breath.

Chromsky did not look back until he had been down several corridors and up a short flight of stairs. Then he opened the door into a briefing room and, almost as an afterthought, held it open for Benny to enter.

'Thank you, *sir*,' she said sweetly as she brushed past him. A nerve twitched under his eye. Then he followed her in and closed the door. The room was largely filled with a conference table, around which half a dozen people were already sitting. They were not talking to each other, which Benny decided was either very professional of them, or a bad sign. Or perhaps both.

Almost as soon as Benny had sat in the nearest vacant seat, the door opened again, and Taffeta Graize walked in. She nodded to Chromsky, who made a point of standing beside her at the head of the table as she spoke. What she said was both boring and predictable. Also, after Braxiatel's briefing, Benny soon realized she already knew more than most people in the room, and was not about to learn



anything new. *Medusa* was an experiment in remote-control technology, and she was coming home. The people in this room were charged with finding out as far as possible what had gone wrong with the experiment.

After some anodyne comments about their all being experts and ideally suited to the task ahead, Graize handed over the meeting to Commander Heath Chromsky for what she called 'operational details'. Chromsky started by explaining how well qualified he was for the job and running through his long but ultimately bland resume. He had been a minor officer of some sort in somebody's space fleet during the post-war militarization. Now he was glad (for which read frustrated) to be assigned to St Oscar's and was working (read cruising) at the forefront of new and exciting technologies (going nowhere in a forgotten backwater).

'Now we shall go round the table and introduce ourselves,' he finished. 'Summerfield.'

Benny toyed briefly with the idea of getting up and going round the table shaking hands. But she was pretty sure that Chromsky's sense of humour would be strained beyond its limits by this. So instead she said, 'Hi, everyone,' and grinned. 'I'm Bernice Summerfield, and I'm a professor of archaeology here at St Oscar's. I'm along to help try to piece together from whatever we find on *Medusa* what happened there twenty years ago. I've got considerable field experience in - ooh - lots of areas and I like to think I'm no stranger to the weird, wonderful and bizarre. So I'm ideally suited to join this team.' She paused for polite laughter that never arrived. So she coughed, and finished with, 'People usually call me Benny.'

'Thank you, Professor,' Chromsky said through his frown, confirming Benny's diagnosis of him.

As they took turns to introduce themselves, Benny began to wish she had brought something to take notes on. But there was something about the people that kept them well defined and differentiated in her mind. She found it very easy to slot each into a mental pigeonhole labelled with a couple of phrases to help her remember who they were.

Helena Gyles was sitting next to Benny. She was probably a bit younger than Chromsky, though she had weathered rather better. Her fair hair was cut into an immaculate short bob. She was one of the two security officers for the mission, whatever that meant, and came across as cynical about the whole thing. In fact, Benny decided, she came across as cynical, full stop.

The other security officer was Rawling Hoyt, a spotty youngster with untidy hair who sounded nervous and had probably never been assigned a real job before in his obviously short career. He looked down at the table in front of him when he spoke. When he had finished he looked round furtively and gave a tentative smile to the woman beside him.

The woman beside him was Andrea Moritz. She was leaning back in her chair, and ignored Hoyt completely. Benny got the impression she wasn't bothering to listen to anyone but herself. She was not much older than Rawling Hoyt, mid-twenties perhaps. Her black hair framed her heart-shaped face perfectly, not a strand out of place. Her manicured hands sported long nails varnished in scarlet. Her make-up was obvious, though not intrusive. In fact, everything about her suggested she was self-designed to be the centre of attention. Her manner further suggested that she was used to getting that attention. In a slightly husky voice she purred that she was the expert on remote-guidance technology. When she spoke, Andrea Moritz seemed to be addressing Forsyth Kerven, who sat two chairs away.

Between Andrea and Kerven was Dorian Phelps. He listened attentively to Andrea. As she spoke, he nodded encouragement she obviously did not need. He was in his late middle age, his hair thinning on top and his voice nasal and authoritarian. Phelps introduced himself in a loud voice, his manner suggesting that everyone else was coming along on his expedition pretty much on sufferance. He spoke with the authority of someone used to thinking he was getting his own way.

Phelps gave his profession as a forensic research scientist, and implied that he would be able to sort out precisely what had happened on *Medusa* within a few moments of arriving on board. He finished up with a comment on how refreshing it was to be with a team largely composed of such mature professional experts. He obviously glanced at Rawling Hoyt as he spoke, but, since Hoyt was once again staring down at the table, his point was lost on the youngster.

Forsyth Kerven was the last to introduce himself. He was, Benny thought, a nice change to most of the others. He spoke quietly but confidently. He was probably, Benny decided, the oldest of the team though he looked in better shape than both Chromsky and Phelps. His steel-grey hair was carefully brushed, and gave him a faintly military look. His face was beginning to show the etched lines of age, running along the contours of his smile rather than his frown. He was dressed in a dark business suit.

'I am an historian and archivist here at the ARD,' Kerven explained carefully. 'One of my specialist subjects is *Medusa* herself, so I feel honoured and privileged to be asked to join this expedition.' He looked across the table towards Benny and Helena Gyles. 'I am looking forward to working with you,' he said, and Benny felt rather than saw Helena stiffen slightly beside her.

After the introductions, Chromsky moved on to the operational details. This, Benny decided afterwards, was a good contender for the most boring part of a meeting she had ever endured. Chromsky was determined to go into infinitesimal detail about where and when they should meet for the shuttle flight, how long it would take, who would sit where, and even how much luggage they could take. The only light relief came from Dorian Phelps's continual interruptions as he struggled to add to what Chromsky was saying in an attempt to show how involved he himself was with the planning and organization.

Eventually, when he had finished, Chromsky stood fully to attention and demanded to know if anyone had any questions.

Forsyth Kerven raised his index finger deferentially and cleared his throat. 'Er, could you perhaps spend a few moments on dress code?' he asked seriously.

Chromsky blinked as this hit him between the eyes.

'Do you advise any particular colours or materials to be avoided, for example?' Kerven went on. 'At all?' The corners of his mouth twitched slightly, but otherwise he seemed entirely serious. Benny smiled, and beside her Helena coughed to conceal her laugh. Most of the others shuffled uneasily, as unsure as Chromsky about whether Kerven was actually serious or not.

Heath Chromsky blinked again. 'I think we can all use our own judgment on that one,' he snapped at last. 'This meeting is adjourned.'

Kerven nodded slowly and seriously, as if this was precisely the reply he had been wanting and expecting. There was a muted shuffling as everyone got to their feet and made for the door.

'Hoyt,' Chromsky called across the room as Benny was in the doorway. 'Hoyt, I want a word with you, if you have a moment.' Benny continued on her way, Chromsky's raised voice following her down the corridor: 'You're supposed to be in security, damn it. When you talk to people you should look at them...'

A hand tapped Benny on the shoulder, and she turned to find Taffeta Graize at her side. 'Hello, there,' Benny said. 'That was a bundle of fun.'

'I'm glad you appreciated it.'

Benny shrugged. 'I'm between terms, so my time, it would seem, is your own.'

'You're being well paid for our time.'

Benny started walking again. 'Wrong. My department is being well paid, and I doubt it would occur to Divsen Follett that I am actually earning any of that. I'll be lucky to get back my expenses.'

'Yes, well I'll tell you what,' Graize said as she walked alongside Benny back towards the reception area. 'How about we pick up the tab for your medical tomorrow.'

Benny stopped in mid step. 'My *what?*'

Graize kept on walking. 'Just a formality. Quick check-up, a couple of inoculations just in case. I've left you a message with the details of when and where. Just joking about the tab, of course.' She stopped and turned, as if remembering something important. 'Oh, and bring a sample.'

'A sample.' Benny wasn't sure she was hearing this properly.

'That's right.' She smiled. 'I assume you can manage something.' Then she turned and continued down the corridor.

'Yes, I can manage something,' Benny called after her. 'It'll be a piece of piss.'

The Old Fourpenny Encob actually cost over a shilling a pint. Braxiatel somehow managed to have most of his pint disappear without seeming to spend much time actually drinking it. Benny put this down in part to the fact that she was doing most of the talking.

They were at a quiet table, or at least one that was in a relatively secluded corner, in the Witch and Whirlwind. Being out of term time, it was slightly less boisterous than usual, but the place was still full to bursting. Benny re-counted the high points of her meeting with the *Medusa* team, which did not take long. Then she complained at length about having to go for a medical the next day.

'Not that I mind,' she finished eventually, and scowled as Braxiatel barely stifled a smile. 'So what have you been up to?' she demanded.

'Quite a lot, actually. But not much that's directly related to the matter under discussion, I'm sorry to have to admit.'

'Other fish to fry?'

He laughed, and drained his glass. 'Bridges to burn, more like.' He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a datadisc. 'I do have this for you, though.'

Benny took the disc. It fitted snugly into the palm of her hand, a plastic cartridge with the recall and playback

controls moulded into the casing. 'The stuff the spider dug up?'

'Well, spiders don't dig. And "stuff" is a little broad as a description goes. But yes, it's the stuff the spider dug up. You'll find it interesting, I think.' He stood, brandishing his empty glass. 'Same again?'

'Mm. Thanks.' Benny slipped the cartridge into her pocket. Something to look at when she got a moment. Maybe later in the evening.

But as things turned out, there wasn't a later in the evening. Benny and Braxiatel chatted and laughed together until he excused himself for 'another engagement, but one that won't be quite so entertaining I suspect'. Benny watched him go, then looked round the bar to see if there was anyone there she knew and wanted to speak to. The whole place seemed a little misty, and she wondered where everyone had gone. Then she caught sight of the clock on the wall, and registered the fact that the laser shutters had been activated over the bar.

The University Medical Centre was an ugly red building much like most of the other ugly red buildings. Benny announced herself to the sour-faced woman at reception. She registered and did not like the way the woman's eyebrows rose when she checked the appointments book. But she was relieved to be shown straight into a consulting room rather than having to wait with the assorted collection of life forms in the reception area, any one of whom might have infected her with something unpleasant.

The consulting room was spotlessly clean and brilliantly white. The female doctor was also spotlessly clean, and her coat was as brilliantly white as the walls, so that Benny was afraid that if the woman stood still she would lose sight of her. Benny handed the doctor her beer bottle. It had a cork stuck in the top. 'Sample,' she explained. 'Probably more potent than what was in the bottle originally.'

The doctor took the bottle gingerly, as if it might shatter at any moment. She looked disapprovingly at the label, and

then set it down carefully on her desk. Then she gave Benny an antiseptic smile and told her to lie down on the couch. After checking Benny's blood pressure and reflexes, she wheeled a large square box across to the couch. A thin probe swung out of the top of the box on an arm, and the Doctor positioned it a few inches above Benny's forehead.

'What's that?'

'It monitors brain activity. Pretty standard these days.' The doctor consulted a readout on the machine, and twisted a dial. 'Alpha waves, encephalographic patterns, that sort of thing.'

'Ah.' Benny tried to sound as if this all made perfect sense to her. There was a buzzing inside her head, as if a moth had got trapped between her ears and was trying to escape through her eyes. 'Should it make me feel dizzy?'

'It might, just for a moment.' The woman leant over and put her hand to Benny's head. She pushed Benny's eyelid back gently with her thumb and stared into her eye. Then she nodded approval, switched off the machine and wheeled it aside. 'Right, just a quick injection and we're about done.'

Benny leant up on her elbow. She watched as the Doctor pulled open a drawer in her desk. It was full of small vials sealed with white membranes. One, in the front row, had a red top, and it was this one that the doctor took out. She picked up a sealed plastic packet, ripped it open and took out an auto-injector. The nozzle was also hermetically sealed. She attached the nozzle to the injector, then placed the vial in a cavity in the side, screwing it firmly into place. She turned to Benny. 'Arm.'

Benny pushed up her left sleeve, and looked away as the doctor felt for a vein. A moment later she felt the prick of the injection. The buzzing was back in her head, not as strong as before, but noticeable.

'There, all done,' the doctor said through a muzzy haze. Benny sank back down on the couch.

'Dizzy again?'

'A little.'

‘It’ll pass in a moment. There, you’re getting your colour back.’

Benny did feel a little better now. She sat up carefully and swung her legs over the edge of the couch. ‘I don’t normally get woozy,’ she admitted. Maybe she had overdone things the previous night. Maybe she should have had a decent breakfast.

‘Better now?’

‘Yes, thanks.’

The doctor took her arm and led her to the door. ‘You may have the odd slightly dizzy spell as the inoculation spreads through your bloodstream. It’s really just to guard against any lingering viruses on the ship, since we don’t know what state the artificial atmosphere will be in. Nothing to worry about, though.’

‘Thanks.’ Benny opened the door.

‘Oh, one other thing.’

‘Yes?’ She paused on the threshold.

‘Avoid all alcohol for at least twenty-four hours. It may interfere with the treatment.’

Benny smiled. Past the doctor she could see her beer bottle standing proudly on the desk at the back of the room. ‘That’s no problem,’ she said. ‘I never touch the stuff.’

By the time she met Skutloid and Braxiatel that evening, she had forgotten the warning. And by the time she remembered it, she was past caring.

*My father was my best friend. He was always there when I needed him, always attentive. I never really got on with the other children. We spoke, we played, hut we were never friends. Not really. Away from school, or later from college or work, I never contacted any of them.*

*Mum went away when I was too young to understand what that meant. But Dad stayed. I thought she had left us. Even when I was older I thought she really had left. But one day, when I was home from college, when we were going through an old chest just looking through to see if there was anything in it worth keeping, I found a pendant. It wasn’t much, not*



worth a second glance, and I tossed it aside on to the growing pile of junk.

But my father saw it as I threw it away, reached for it and grabbed it. I heard him gasp, and I thought he was starting to laugh. It was only as the tears welled up in his eyes that I saw he was crying. He sat there, rocking slowly back and forth on his knees, clutching the pendant to his chest. And in that moment I realized where Mother had gone. And I felt guilty for never having asked before. For assuming she had left us through choice.

He hugged me tight to him, the pendant between us, and we cried together. Father and daughter weeping for wife and mother.

Father and daughter?

## CHAPTER 3

The tiny bullet-nosed scout ship was closing on the huge cruise liner. The scout ship was a rounded, streamlined shape, composed of something that resembled gunmetal. *Medusa* was a towering mass of crenellations and buttresses in pitted, scarred white. Painted on the side, pockmarked by a hundred meteorites, was a picture of Medusa herself, a woman's smiling face, her hair a mass of writhing snakes. When *Medusa* had first been launched she had been magnificent; now her splendour was tarnished by twenty years in space.

The scout ship was lost against the huge bulk of *Medusa* as the two craft closed, merged. The small bullet edged gently into a tiny dark opening in the side of the larger ship and was lost from sight.

They stood at the edge of the docking bay and watched as the scout ship lifted slowly off the floor, as if supported by jets of steam and flame. It swivelled ponderously on its axis, the pilot's face visible for a few seconds at the front observation port as he gave them a cheery wave. Then his face was lost as the ship finished its turn and headed out of the bay, away from *Medusa*, gathering speed rapidly as it went.

'Right,' Chromsky said, slapping his gloved hands together soundlessly. 'We're on our own now.' His voice was slightly broken, disjointed through the comms link between the suits. Let's get the gear inside and check how the atmosphere is doing. '

'If there is any atmosphere.' Helena Gyles's muttered comment was automatically increased to a volume that everyone could comfortably hear as it was relayed to their internal helmet speakers.

They each picked up one of the crates and followed Chromsky to the main lock. All except Andrea Moritz, who

somehow contrived it so that there was nothing left to carry by the time she followed. Chromsky waited at the airlock for her to open the door. Eventually he set down the crate he was carrying and did it himself.

Whereas the docking bay, open to space and devoid of artificial atmosphere, could have been on any ship, the interior was quite different. It was lit by pale, flickering wall lights. Further along the corridor in which the team were now standing, Benny could see naked bulbs strung from the ceiling. These too glowed with a pale luminosity, though they flickered less. The floor of the corridor was deeply carpeted, the colour a dark maroon so far as one could tell in the barely adequate light. The snake-haired Medusa emblem was stamped along it at regular intervals, the woman peering up at them through the layers of dust. The walls were wood-panelled; paintings in gilt frames were hung along the corridor, each painting paired with one of the wall lights above it. The ceiling was high, apparently plaster, swirled into deep abstract patterns.

One way the corridor stretched out and round a corner, unbroken. The other, it bent round the other way, presumably following the curvature of the ship. The airlock door they had come through was large and oak-panelled on this side. The opening controls were set into the panelling, discreet but apparent. Further down from the airlock, on the other side of the passageway, was another door. Again it was oak-panelled, but smaller. A sign above it read STEWARDS ONLY.

And everywhere there was dust and cobwebs. Their boots left footprints in the dust on the floor as they sank into the carpet. The paintings were so covered with cobwebs that it was almost impossible to make out the subject matter. They were stained dark with grime, the flickering illumination emerging from cobwebbed cocoons like candlelight, smudged and dissipated still further.

‘I’m surprised the lighting is still functional.’ Dorian Phelps swung round towards Andrea Moritz. ‘You’re the technologist, Andrea. Would you have expected that?’

‘Not without some maintenance. Possible, but unlikely. Emergency power would be concentrated on atmosphere and life-support rather than lighting the whole ship. Vital areas maybe: routes to the escape equipment.’

‘You think so?’ Chromsky asked. His tone suggested he intended this as a comment rather than as a genuine question.

But Andrea immediately snapped back. ‘Are you questioning my professional opinion? I do have some idea what I’m talking about, you know.’

‘Of course,’ Phelps said smoothly before Chromsky could reply. ‘And I think your diagnosis was an excellent analysis of the situation.’

Forsyth Kerven stepped up to the nearest painting. Whether he intended it or not, it stopped Andrea from replying as she turned with everyone else to see what he was doing. Kerven reached out a gauntleted hand and pulled some of the cobwebs away. They were so matted and tangled that the painting beneath shifted position on the panelling as he dug down to it. When he had made a window through the cocoon, he brushed lightly at the surface of the picture with the back of his hand. Through the dust, an image was slowly swept into view, growing more vivid with each stroke of the hand. After a moment, the centre of the picture was visible, though the edges were still lost beneath the years it had waited unseen.

Benny leant forward. The awkwardness of the helmet and the slight distortion through the visor made it difficult to get a clear view around Kerven. The picture was of a small girl in an Edwardian dress. She was sitting on a stone step, her eyes large and her hair a mass of careful curls. Her hands were cupped in front of her, and on them rested a butterfly, its wings raised as if alighting. Or preparing to fly away again.

‘*Memories of Childhood*,’ Kerven said as he stood back to let the others see. ‘It’s by Anton Tylos.’

‘An original?’ Rawling Hoyt’s question hung inside their helmets for a moment. Everyone, Benny noticed, turned to

Kerven, their suits emphasizing and betraying the slight movement.

Kerven chuckled. 'Hardly. A print, I think.'

'Stupid boy.' Chromsky's comment had not needed amplification from his suit's audio systems. It was intended to be heard by everyone. And, especially since Chromsky, like everyone else, had turned to Kerven for an answer to the lad's question, Benny hated him for it.

Chromsky continued. 'Right, let's get the gear shifted and find somewhere to set up shop and do an atmosphere check.'

'I don't think we need an atmosphere check.' Helena Gyles's voice was slightly husky in Benny's ears. 'It's obviously safe to breathe.'

'What makes you say that?' Phelps asked.

'You can't possibly tell whether we can breathe in here without a full check.' Chromsky cut across the end of Phelps's comment.

'Well,' Helena replied, 'he's breathing.' She pointed, the inflexibility of the glove of her suit meaning that her whole hand was stretched out towards the approaching figure.

The figure was a man, perhaps in his thirties. He was tall and broad-shouldered and had a dark beard. He was dressed in a set of grubby overalls, no spacesuit, no helmet.

That was good enough for Benny. She reached up and fumbled with the release catches at the point where her bulky helmet joined the clumsy suit. There was a hiss of released pressure as she pulled the helmet off over her head. Beside her, Helena Gyles had already taken off her own helmet. After a moment's pause, the others started to remove theirs too. Andrea Moritz shook her head so that her long black hair fell down over the wide collar of her suit. Chromsky scowled at the approaching stranger.

'I saw your ship arriving,' the stranger said. 'I was in the ballroom.' His voice was deep and accentless. Cultured and clear. 'You took your time.'

'Did you get the lights working?' Chromsky demanded.

The man turned to him. 'Yes. Yes I did. I've got as much going as I can. That's not very much though, I'm afraid. But

we do have lighting throughout the ship now at least. And life-support, of course.'

'Good.' Chromsky seemed at a loss for anything else to say for a second. Then he added. 'Well done. Good work.'

'I didn't realize,' Dorian Phelps said, 'that anyone was already here, on *Medusa*.'

The man shrugged. 'Just getting things ready. In advance. Is that a problem?'

'No problem,' Chromsky assured him. 'Need-to-know,' he barked at Phelps.

'So you knew he was here?'

'Of course. Yes.' Chromsky met Phelps's stare. 'Of course I knew.'

Benny stepped forward. She was not at all convinced that this was getting them anywhere. She held out her hand to the newcomer, and after a hesitation, he shook it firmly. 'I'm Benny,' she said. 'I'm afraid I don't know your name.'

'My name?' He seemed thrown by the implied question. He looked round, then back at Benny, though his focus seemed to be somewhere else, distant. 'Stuart.' He smiled at her, his beard breaking open to reveal perfect teeth. His eyes glistened in the flickering light. 'Stuart Stonely. Pleased to meet you, Benny.'

Stuart led them back along the corridor in the direction he had come. Around the corner there was a short flight of steps up to an open-plan foyer area. Plush furniture - couches and armchairs - was arranged round the walls, with small tables and upright chairs in the middle of the area. Everything was thick with dust. The upright chairs looked like they were held together by the cobwebs. The other furniture looked like it had arrived in the cobwebs and not yet been unpacked. From this hub, other dusky corridors branched off. Several of them were almost webbed over, though Benny could just see doors set into the panelled walls along some of the others.

'Staterooms,' Stuart explained. 'Living accommodation. Some quite large suites.'

'Where's the best place to set up the equipment?' Chromsky asked, somehow making it sound like an order rather than a question.

'I've been using the officers' mess. It's pretty central, and I've rigged up some better lighting in there.' He led the way. 'So, what's the deal with getting off this ship again?' Stuart asked as he led them along another dimly lit corridor.

'They didn't tell you?' Phelps asked.

'They didn't tell me anything much. Bit of a rush.'

'I can imagine,' Benny said.

'The scout ship will return in a week,' Chromsky admitted. 'Unless we signal Dellah ahead of that time that we need extraction.'

'Extraction?' Stuart seemed amused by the choice of word. 'Do you mean parentage, ancestry, family line? Or removal?'

'Definitely "removal",' Kerven told him with a smile in his eyes. 'You know, like a rotten tooth.'

Stuart, Benny and Helena laughed. Hoyt started to laugh, then stopped abruptly as Chromsky scowled at him. Most of the others seemed not to have heard.

The officers' mess was comparatively clean. The dust was not so thick, and the cobwebs seemed for the most part to have been banished. It looked to Benny like she imagined the smoking room of a gentlemen's club to be. There was even a semicircular bar in one corner. The floor and tables were littered with books. Old-fashioned books, printed on paper and bound in leather. Benny glanced at a couple, reading the titles. They seemed mainly to be reference books - encyclopaedias and dictionaries. *Reinforced Duralinium Simply Explained* caught her eye, and her imagination.

'We can clear these away,' Stuart said. He sounded almost apologetic.

'I wonder what they were up to,' Kerven murmured. He picked up an encyclopaedia that had been left open, face down on a table. He turned it over and scanned quickly through the information on the page. Benny peered over his shoulder, and he held the book so she could see it too. The main heading on the left-hand page was 'Memory'.

‘Have you seen any evidence of what happened to the passengers and crew?’ Phelps asked Stuart.

‘Well,’ Stuart said slowly, ‘that depends on what you mean by evidence. There are several bodies lying about the place. if that’s any help.’ He looked round, seeming surprised by the way everyone was now looking at him. ‘They were dead when I arrived,’ he added cautiously.

‘Surprise us,’ Andrea Moritz said.

Stuart frowned. ‘Boo,’ he offered, without much enthusiasm.

‘I suggest we do a quick recce,’ Phelps said. ‘Take a look at these bodies.’

‘You do a recce,’ Chromsky said shortly. ‘Hoyt, you and Andrea can help me unpack and set up the equipment.’

‘That’s fine,’ Benny said. ‘But first I’m changing out of this gear.’

‘There’s a set of staterooms and apartments down the next walkway,’ Stuart told her. ‘I suggest you each take one of those. I’ve taken the nearest already, but the others aren’t in too bad shape. They could do with a quick dusting down, of course.’

Chromsky glared at him. ‘And what made you think you could just help yourself to the nearest room?’

Stuart smiled, unfazed. ‘Well,’ he said reasonably, ‘I was here first.’

The majority of the ship seemed to be built so that corridors and passageways ran out from open areas. Off these corridors were rooms, sometimes living accommodation for the passengers, sometimes recreational facilities like a gym, a bar, even a billiards room, sometimes crew quarters or facilities. There was a large galley area close to the officers’ mess, its walls and ceiling black from ancient smoke. Stuart had cleaned this out too, and the pile of washing-up in the sink suggested he had cooked quite a few meals in there.

‘How long have you been here?’ Benny asked him as he led her, together with Dorian Phelps, Helena Gyles and Forsyth Kerven, past the galley.



‘Long enough,’ he replied. ‘I shall be glad to get away from here.’

Benny did not press the point. It struck her as odd that Stuart had been sent on ahead of them at all. Their own expedition had been arranged in a rush, so she could quite imagine he had not been properly briefed. And while it made sense to have things set up for their arrival, it did nothing to help the argument that they needed to examine the ship before anyone else arrived and disturbed whatever evidence they might otherwise be able to piece together. But she did not press the point. Stuart was hardly the one to blame any more than he was the one to explain the rationale behind his presence.

In fact, he had evidently made a good study of the ship. He knew his way around, despite the fact that to Benny all the corridors and open areas looked pretty much alike. He also pointed out various things of interest along the way.

‘Look at this,’ Stuart said as they found themselves in yet another of the open-plan areas. He pointed to a hole in the back of an armchair, pushing his fingertip inside the edge.

‘Let me see.’ Phelps eased him aside, and blew the dust away from the upholstery. Then he too wiggled his finger into the hole. He frowned, and pushed his thumb in after the finger. The old fabric tore as he withdrew a small dull object from inside.

‘What is it?’ Kerven asked.

Benny knew as soon as she saw it. So did Helena. ‘It’s a bullet,’ Helena said. ‘From a percussion weapon.’ She shook her head. ‘Why would anyone want to use something so antiquated and inefficient.’

‘No technology, remember.’ Kerven took the slug gently from Phelps and examined it. ‘Blaster damage would be a little out of place here, don’t you think?’ He gestured round the room. Even covered in dust and swathed in cobwebs the *uncien regime* splendour was undeniable. ‘But a lead bullet, fired from a weapon of a bygone, more honourable and more splendid age... Well, it seems somehow quite in keeping, wouldn’t you say?’

Phelps took the bullet back from him, and pushed it into a small plastic bag he had produced from his pocket. 'I shall examine that properly later,' he declared importantly. I think I can establish the type of weapon it originated from.'

Benny leant closer to Helena. 'It's a point-two-two round from a handgun,' she said quietly. 'And judging by the lack of powder burns and the fact it didn't go right through, it was not fired from very close.'

Kerven was frowning. 'There were no weapons on the manifest for the original mission,' he said. 'And the crew and passengers all had their luggage and personal effects scanned and approved before they boarded.'

'Well,' Benny pointed out, 'there was certainly a gun on board somehow. At least one.'

The bodies, like everything else on the ship, were wreathed in cobwebs and choked with dust. The first was lying skewed across the corridor. Benny did not have to get too close to see that the figure was female, face down, and had been shot in the back. The body was badly decomposed, a dried husk beneath the dirt and grime. A large stain was barely visible across the carpet under the dust. The edges blurred and vanished into one of the stylized faces of Medusa as the light flickered.

In the next open area there were four more bodies, three male and one female. All of them bore the marks of a violent death inflicted by person or persons unknown. The woman's skull was almost completely shattered, barely a quarter of it still attached to her body. Also, she had been stabbed through the chest. What looked like a carving knife lay on the ground nearby, its blade tarnished and stained.

Two of the three men had been shot. One lay sprawled at the foot of the three steps that led up into the area, a neat hole drilled into the forehead of his skull. The second had been shot in the chest and lay, a crumpled heap, on the far side of the area. The third man was close to the woman's body, curled up on his side. A dark stain round his head and neck showed through the grey of the dust.

'Do we know how many people there were on the original trip?' Helena asked Kerven while Phelps examined the bodies. 'There's room on this ship for hundreds of people.'

Kerven nodded. 'That was the plan, of course. But for the maiden voyage there were only two stewards, four passengers, and the captain of course.'

'They were more concerned with testing the technology - or lack of it - than the passenger facilities, then.'

'Yes, Benny, that's right.' He managed to make 'Benny' sound as formal, polite and proper as if he'd addressed her as 'Professor Summerfield'. He pointed back towards the corridor they had come along. 'My guess, from the crew and passenger data that I've seen, is that the woman out there who's been shot in the back is - was - Martia Lupis. She was the chief steward. In which case the woman over there is either Anni Goranson or Bettyana Quist. They were both passengers. My money is on Quist.'

'Why?'

'Traces of blonde hair. Goranson was a brunette.'

Benny counted up in her head. Kerven did not know that she had seen the passenger and crew records as well, but he had given her an opening. 'So, we're still missing a few bodies. Goranson, at least.'

Kerven nodded. 'Two bodies. The other, I think, is the captain of the ship - Kallis Shaw.'

'So where do you suppose they are?' Helena asked Kerven.

But it was Stuart who answered. 'They're in the sickbay,' he said. 'At least, I think they are.'

The sickbay was actually the size of a small hospital ward. There was a pathology lab in the same corridor, together with two consulting rooms and a reception area. Off the path lab, through a glass door, there was another small consulting room complete with surgical table. Half a dozen large metal lockers were built into one wall. All except two of the lockers contained a sealed casket. These two missing caskets were side by side on trestles along one of the other walls. There

were footprints in the dust from where Stuart had been in before, though already they were coated with another layer.

Phelps bent over one of the caskets, inspecting it, brushing some of the dust away from its surface. 'Hermetically sealed. These canisters are used for storing medical waste until it can be properly disposed of. But I doubt they had enough to fill one, never mind two of the things. The only way to find out what's really inside would be to open it.'

'Do we really want to do that?' Helena asked.

'Of course.'

'Then I suggest you get on with it, since you're the forensics expert,' Kerven told him. 'We'll wait outside in the lab and watch through the door. Just in case there's a risk of infection.'

'It should be OK,' Benny said. 'We've had the inoculation after all.' Nobody commented, so Benny added, 'And the sample.' This lot were even more lacking in humour than she had originally thought.

Kerven was leading them back to the door,' leaving Phelps standing by the caskets and looking slightly pale. Kerven shut the door, and they crowded round the glass panel.

In the makeshift mortuary, Phelps pulled a sealed packet from a grimy dispenser on the wall. There was a shower of dust as he ripped it open and took out a pair of thin surgical gloves. 'Right then.' Phelps's voice was muffled but audible. He flexed his hands over the top of one of the caskets, pulling on the gloves.

'We can hear him,' Benny said quietly. 'This door isn't anything like airtight. If you're concerned about -'

'I'm not,' Kerven said in a loud whisper. 'Not really. The sterile environment inside the containers will have preserved whatever's inside pretty much exactly as it was when it went in. There's no more chance of infection from inside than there is from the general atmosphere.'

'So, why...' Helena began to form the obvious question.

'Well, it does him no harm to sweat a bit, does it?' Kerven smiled. 'It might even bring him back to the real world a bit from whatever exalted position he thinks he's currently in.'

They stifled their amusement, and watched as Phelps released the catch on the casket. The way the lid was hinged meant that it opened so Phelps could see inside, but Benny, Kerven and Helena Gyles could not. As he lifted the lid, it also cut off their view of Phelps's face. But they heard his muffled intake of breath. Then the lid slammed shut again. Phelps was smiling with something akin to relief.

'Can you hear me?' he called out to them.

We can,' Kerven replied loudly. 'What's inside?'

'A body. Male. Middle-aged. The body is well preserved. He was killed by a blow of considerable force directed to the back of the skull.'

'He had his head smashed in,' Benny translated.

'I'm now moving on to the second casket. 'Phelps's manner was far more confident now as he ran his hands over the dusty surface, sending a swirling cloud of particles curling into the air in its wake. 'The surface seems slightly uneven, not sure why. I am now releasing the clasps.' He swung the lid open as before.

They heard him cry out quite clearly. Then the lid slammed down again. Behind the casket, Phelps's face had drained of colour. He kept his hands on the top of the casket, as if holding the lid down. 'Oh my God,' he said. 'Oh my God.' He looked up at them, his eyes wide and staring. 'What the hell happened here?'

'I think that's enough,' Stuart said quietly and opened the door. Benny, Kerven and Helena followed him over to where Phelps was standing, still leaning on the casket and breathing heavily.

'I think you should see this,' he said.

'Do we want to?' Benny asked.

He swallowed. 'No. But maybe you should.' His voice was a little calmer now.

She looked into his eyes. He was regaining his colour a little, and breathing more easily. 'OK,' she said. She braced herself, and felt Helena flinch beside her as Phelps slowly raised the lid of the casket once more.

Inside was another body. A woman. She was dressed in a long evening gown. She looked as if she had been inside the casket for a matter of hours rather than decades, only the sickly sweet smell of death giving any hint to the real age of the corpse. She had long brown hair, tangled and matted, and her face was scratched and scarred. There was a smear of dried blood down from her mouth and across her chin.

The dress was frayed and torn, and her grazed, sore knees were visible where the material had worn through. She was curled, as far as the limited space in the casket had allowed, into a foetal position. The inside of the lid of the casket was battered and dented where she had hammered against it with her hands, butted it with her head, slammed her knees into it again and again as she had tried to escape from the stifling darkness.

Benny felt her gorge rising as she looked down at the body of Anni Goranson. The contorted agony of the face, the grazed knees and bruised forehead, the scratches across her cheeks and at her throat where she had scrabbled for air were not the worst of it. The worst of it was her hands.

Benny had no idea how long the air in the casket would have lasted. Possibly several minutes - it was a large interior. The fingernails were broken back to the quick, torn almost out of their sockets as the woman had scratched and scraped at the insides of her coffin. One of the fingers on the left hand was stripped bare so that the pale bone shone through, crusted round with dried blood. The temptation to match the injury to the traces of blood round the mouth was one Benny tried to avoid. And failed.

Somewhere in the fuzz behind her, Benny could hear retching, was half aware that Helena Gyles was throwing up in the dust-blocked sink in the corner of the room.

The lid slammed shut, cutting off Benny's view but not the image in her mind. Stuart took her by the shoulders and led her gently to a chair. Phelps and Kerven were muttering quietly over the closed casket. Helena was still leaning over the sink. Stuart knelt in front of Benny, looking into her face, checking she was all right. She tried to smile weakly.

The hands had been the worst. The way they were clutched to her chest. The way the whole body seemed to be curled around them, protecting and gaining some small comfort from what they held so desperately close.

Anni Goranson had been clutching a small leather-bound book.

The communications equipment was all self-powered. The battery packs were guaranteed for longer than any of the expedition members had reasonable hopes of living, and the backup systems drew enough energy from the nearest star to maintain limited functionality just in case there was a problem with the primary supply.

So when Chromsky, Moritz and Hoyt finished assembling the kit and powered it on, none of them was prepared for the dull click and complete lack of power. Obviously they had connected something up wrong somewhere. Or rather, as Chromsky pointed out to him, Rawling Hoyt had connected something up wrong somewhere as he was helping Andrea Moritz with the phase signallers.

So they checked all the connections and tightened everything that could possibly be tightened. And when that failed to have any positive effect, they took the whole rig apart and started again from scratch. Only then, when there was still no response from any of the systems, did they begin to worry.

The personal communications equipment - radios and tracker-badges - also failed to power on. In a few minutes, they had discovered that not a single piece of equipment they had brought with them was working.

‘It can’t all have failed,’ Andrea pointed out reasonably.

‘She’s right, sir,’ Hoyt offered cautiously.

‘What do you know about it?’ Chromsky shook his head in disgust. ‘Maybe it’s *Medusa*,’ he said.

‘How do you mean?’

‘Well, the idea was that there was no modern technology on board, right? The most sophisticated stuff we’ve seen so far is

the lighting, and that's all cable-connected, probably from the main power systems.'

Andrea shook her head. 'I don't see what you're getting at.'

'I don't know. Perhaps there's some sort of technology-suppressing field, in case they tried to cheat or something. To guarantee the integrity of the experiment.'

'How would that work?' Hoyt asked.

'It doesn't matter how it works. It works. That's all we need to know.'

'It's ridiculous,' Andrea retorted. 'I don't know of any way of singling out just some equipment or technology and suppressing the power for it.'

'This was an experiment, right? So maybe they were testing something new.'

'Twenty years ago.'

Chromsky held his index finger close under Andrea's nose. 'None of this stuff is working, that's all I know. We don't need to rationalize it, we just need to cope with it. Right?'

She looked away. 'Right,' she said quietly.

'Right, *sir*,' Chromsky snapped.

She turned back to face him. 'I said, *right*.'

Stuart showed them a shorter route back from the makeshift mortuary to the officers' mess rather than retrace their obvious footsteps via the area where the other bodies lay. Predictably, the route traversed mainly corridors and several open areas. But there was one exception. The ballroom.

They emerged from yet another passageway lined with cabin doors on to an open-galleried area. The main clue that there was a view out over another room was the enormous chandelier hanging almost at eye level beyond the railings. Once it must have sparkled with crystal clarity and luminescence, but now it dripped with cobwebs, the glass droplets that formed its main structure faded and misty with dust and dirt.

Benny and the others made their way over to the banister railings along the far side of the area and looked down into the huge chamber below. Helena reached the railings first,



and leant out over them as she looked down. Benny was close behind her, and looked out over the railings into the ballroom.

The room was as decayed and dust-ridden as any of the others. The whole central area was given over to a wooden dance floor. The edges of the room were carpeted, with round tables, complete with tablecloths, arranged in a herringbone pattern along three of them. Interspersed with the tables, huge wood-panelled square pillars reached up to the roof, Medusa's face carved into the woodwork. As Benny looked out across the room, the pillars grew up past her into the ceiling, like huge regular trees. She counted thirteen pillars in all, and counted again to be sure. Unlucky for some.

The fourth side was taken up with a large bar. The bottles hanging behind the bar were vintage-old. The glasses as misty and grubby as the chandelier, and probably made from a similar lead crystal. The surface of the bar had a heavy woodgrain that showed through the dirt like swirling ripples on stagnant water. There was a good-sized area between the bar and the dance area where people could stand and queue for drinks. There were several tall bar stools arranged at irregular intervals along the length of the counter.

Beside her, Benny heard Helena gasp, and turned in time to see her sway backward on her heels. She clasped her hand to her mouth and stepped back.

At once Kerven was beside her. 'What is it?' he asked, putting an arm round Helena's shoulder. 'What's wrong?'

She shook herself loose, and turned back to the railing. 'Did you see it?' she asked Benny. 'Did you see . . . anything?'

Benny shook her head. 'There's nothing there,' she said. 'What did you see?'

Helena shook her head. 'I must have imagined it,' she said quietly. 'I'm sorry.' Then she turned away, leaning back on the railing and breathing deeply.

'It's been a busy day,' Kerven said gently. 'We're all a bit jumpy.'

Stuart led them along the gallery. At the end the railings became real banisters, edging a wide stairway that looped

down into the ballroom. It emerged at one end, widening at the bottom to form an impressive entrance to the room. Benny could imagine the passengers, decked out in their most lavish finery, walking down this stairway. Couples hand in hand descending like kings and queens, announced by a footman at the base of the stairs as they swept into the ballroom and took to the dance floor. For a moment the music of the waltz swelled in her ears, and she could hear the steward calling, 'Mr Rathbone Quarrel and Miss Martia Lupis.' Just for a moment - then the spell was broken and all was silence.

They made their way across the dance floor to a side exit without further comment. Only once did they stop, beside one of the pillars. Nobody spoke, but they all exchanged glances and shrugs. The panelling on two of the four sides was splintered and wrenched apart. Pieces of wood lay scattered across the carpeted floor, half buried by the dust. As they passed, their feet crunched on broken glass as well as splintered wood. Inside, the pillar was hollow, the load-bearing structure made up of four metal supports, one at each corner.

Stuart hardly gave the pillar a look, skirting widely round it and continuing to the door without looking back.

Weird, Benny decided. Big-time weird. Working out what had happened here two decades ago was not going to be as straightforward as she had hoped.

## CHAPTER 4

*It got kind of crazy towards the end, I suppose. It came to the point where I couldn't be in the same room and not he watching her. Staring at her. She knew, of course. She liked to be the centre of attention, not just from me but from everyone.*

*Occasionally she would look my way, and when I dared to look back, not to flinch away under the impact of her gaze, I saw that she was looking right through me.*

*It was always like that, except of course that I had never noticed before. She was happy to get the attention, glad of the interest. She liked to be admired, to be looked after. Not in the way that Playdon fathered her. Father and daughter. But in having things done for her. I don't think it ever occurred to her that she could - or should - get herself a drink, cook herself a meal, carry the equipment, open the door for herself*

*But I never thought like this. I never looked beyond adolescent adoration. There was not a day when I ever ventured past the point in a one-sided relationship where I worshipped her body from afar and made excuses for the personality lurking inside it.*

*I never thought like this. Never think like this. These are not the memories of an ageing adolescent, young after his years. My years. My thoughts. Wise after death.*

After sitting through half an hour of Heath Chromsky and Andrea Moritz arguing about the possibility of a technology-suppressing field, Benny decided to give her ears a rest. Phelps was siding with Andrea, patting her encouragingly on the shoulder and not noticing her increasing agitation with him. Chromsky was shouting at everyone, especially Bawling Hoyt. Hoyt, not learning from painful experience, was continuing to offer what he obviously considered were helpful comments.

Stuart and Benny sat at the back of the mess taking no active part in the proceedings, although Stuart seemed enthralled by the interplay. Helena Gyles had not stayed for much longer than it took to find out that the equipment was 'functionally nonoperational', as Andrea had put it (or 'shot to hell', as Chromsky had said; in her own mind, Benny settled on 'buggered'). Kerven had left soon after Helena, shaking his head in ill-concealed wonder at the futility of the conversation.

Benny left them to it when the same arguments came round for the third time. Her cabin was a short way down the nearest corridor. She passed Helena Gyles's cabin on the way. The door was closed, but she could hear a noise from inside. It sounded like she was crying, sobbing. Benny paused, considering whether to knock and check everything was all right. As she waited, the noise died away. Perhaps Helena's experience in the ballroom had unsettled her more than Benny had thought. She waited a few seconds to see if she heard the sobbing again, but there was nothing. Best to let her work it out herself for the moment, Benny decided.

The stateroom that Benny had taken was large and plush. Or rather, it would be when she had properly dusted and cleaned everything, assuming she ever got round to it. There were three rooms. The first was a living area complete with two small sofas, a low coffee table and a writing desk and upright chair. Off this was a bedroom almost filled by a huge bed and lined with wardrobes. A dressing table nestled in an alcove between the wardrobes, a mirror hanging over it and an upholstered stool pushed underneath. You could write your name in the dust on the mirror, and Benny had. Then she had wiped it over with a damp cloth by way of making a start on the cleaning. Off the bedroom was an ornate and well-appointed bathroom spoilt only by the grime on the marbled floor and wall tiles and the black mess that lined the bath.

Benny had unpacked before touring the ship with Stuart and the others. What this meant in practice was that she had emptied her holdall on to the bed, left the clothes in a heap

and stood the three bottles of wine she had carefully wrapped inside them in a line on the dressing table. They were arranged in front of the mirror, so that it looked as if there were actually six bottles. Benny wondered whether she should take this as a good sign or whether it was an ill omen that she was seeing double before she'd even opened the first bottle.

She lifted her clothes off the bed and dumped them on the stool. Then she took a side of the quilt in her hands and gave it a good shake. A wave crossed the bed as the quilt lifted and fell, and Benny coughed a lot as she waited for the cloud of dust to settle again. She abandoned the bed, and rummaged instead through her clothes, eventually finding a small, red, plastic beaker. There were cut-glass tumblers in the bathroom, but, given the state they were in, Benny decided she would rather drink out of a pair of her ex-husband's socks. And she knew his socks well enough to realize that this was quite an admission.

In among the clothes, while rummaging for a corkscrew, Benny had also come across the small cartridge of a datadisc that Braxiatel had given her. She looked at it for a moment, passed her thumb gently over the controls set into the casing. 'So much for technology,' she muttered, and tossed it aside before continuing her search for the corkscrew.

The investigation was slow and painstaking. Having established that the crew and passengers were all beyond help, Benny insisted that nobody disturb the areas where the bodies had been found.

Without his communications equipment and the other command-and-control technology, Chromsky was reduced to shouting orders at people whenever he came across them. Kerven was conducting a room-to-room survey of the ship and updating the existing records by hand as he went. Nobody liked to ask Andrea what she was doing, but it seemed to involve time alone in her cabin, lots of make-up and loitering around where the others were working without actually offering to help much. Phelps tried to persuade her

to assist him with the forensics, but after a morning she seemed to have given up on that.

Hoyt and Helena acted as general help to the others. Hoyt spent most of his time being sent on useless errands by Chromsky and was then berated for some substandard aspect of them. Helena somehow ended up quietly and apparently resentfully taking notes for Forsyth Kerven as he roamed the ship. The only person apparently more disgusted with this arrangement than Helena was Andrea Moritz, who seemed to regard this as the sort of soft option she had been looking out for herself.

In fact, Andrea's real problem was less straightforward. Neither Phelps nor Hoyt could do enough for her or pay her enough attention, albeit in rather different ways, and she reckoned she could wrap Chromsky round her little finger. But Kerven seemed immune to her charms. This she found galling, not least as she had already decided he was the most interesting and intelligent of the men aboard. She discounted Stuart, partly because she did not understand him at all, and partly because she had already set her sights on Kerven before they came aboard. And she was not going to give up without winning. Stuart Stonely could wait his turn.

So it was in something less than her best mood that Andrea Moritz headed back to her cabin to seek solace in her mascara. She had spent a fruitless fifteen minutes being ignored by Helena Gyles, whose icy presence with Kerven she was beginning to resent, and with Kerven himself being polite and civil but hardly impressed. She turned the corner into the main corridor leading back to the mess, and stopped dead.

The contrast was startling. Who had done it, and how they had managed such a thorough job, was a mystery. For once Andrea was herself impressed. The corridor ahead of her was spotlessly clean and brightly lit. The pictures on the wall were vivid and sharp within their polished gilt frames. The pile of the carpet was soft under her feet. The wood panelling had been polished until it shone. But hardly twenty minutes

previously the passage had been dimly lit and nearly an inch deep in dust. She looked round, back the way she had come, to remind herself of how this corridor had been.

The open area she had just left was the same. It was clean, polished, bright. Yet a moment ago it had been obscured and tarnished by the dirt of twenty years or more. Andrea felt her head begin to spin. She reached out her hand and leant on the wood-lined wall of the corridor for support and closed her eyes. She still felt faint, and allowed herself to sink to her knees, hugging the wall as she went. Her cheek was close against the wood. Only when she was crouched close to the floor did she open her eyes again.

The carpet at her feet was a grimy ruin in the flickering light. Medusa's stylized face grinned up at her through the dust. Andrea gasped, lurching to her feet. Beside her, the stained dirty panelling was scarred down almost to the ground by a ragged wide line where the wood showed more clearly through the dust. It took her a second to work out what it was. Then she saw the dirt clinging to the side of her otherwise spotless designer overalls. She raised her hand, angled it towards the faint light, and stared in horror at the ingrained dirt that blackened the palm. She knew from the feel of it, from the smell of it, that her cheek was encrusted with filth scraped from the wall. Somehow that, more than the momentary hallucination, affected her, and she screamed. The cry echoed down the passageway, muffled as it went by the layers of dust that ate the sound.

\* \* \*

Andrea Moritz was still trembling as they helped her into one of the easy chairs in the mess. Beneath her make-up, she was pale and drawn. She sat and shivered and told them what she had experienced. The explanation was chopped into phrases and gasps, forced through quivering lips.

'Ridiculous,' was Chromsky's verdict when she had finished. 'You've been working too hard.' His frown deepened as he finished speaking, as if the improbability of his diagnosis had just struck him.

Andrea was too shaken up to protest, but help came from, of all people, Helena Gyles. 'I believe her,' she said quietly.

Chromsky gaped. Phelps was already stooping, patting Andrea's hands in sympathy. 'It'll be all right,' he was saying. 'You just need some rest.'

'I believe she saw what she says,' Helena said, louder this time. When everyone was looking at her, she went on: 'I've seen it too.' Then she looked away, down at the ground.

'In the ballroom?' Benny asked.

Helena nodded. She looked up, her eyes meeting and holding Benny's. 'Yes. Just for a moment, when I reached the railings and looked down into the room, I saw...' Her voice trailed off as she remembered. Her eyes were still on Benny, but the focus was elsewhere. 'I saw the room as it must have been twenty years ago. It was clean. New. The chandelier was sparkling bright. The tables were laid, ready for a party. I looked down into the room, and the bar was clean, the bottles set out ready. The dance floor was polished so that it shone. I could see the outline of my reflection, or perhaps my shadow.' She looked round, her expression begging for belief.

Before anyone could comment, Rawling Hoyt crossed the room to join them. Benny had not noticed he had gone, though that did not surprise her. He was carrying a glass that looked moderately clean. It contained a measure of a pale liquid that Benny's expert eye guessed was brandy.

He handed it without comment to Andrea, pressing her hand round the glass. She did not look up, did not acknowledge his presence. After a few seconds he let go of her hand, and straightened up. Only then did she lift the glass and sip from it, coughing slightly at the strength of the liquid and wiping her lips with the back of her free hand.

'What's that?' Chromsky demanded, catching at Hoyt's sleeve as the youth passed.

'Brandy, sir. I thought it would

'You thought nothing,' Chromsky snapped. 'I'll have no alcohol on my mission. Where did you get it?'

'Well, the bar. Over there.' He gestured to the semicircular bar in the corner of the room.



‘Oh come on,’ Benny chided Chromsky. ‘Lighten up a bit.’

He rounded on her immediately. ‘No alcohol. You understand?’

Phelps said, ‘But surely, this is medicinal.’

Chromsky did not answer him. Instead he crossed to Andrea and prised the glass from her hand. It was already empty and his mouth worked in furious agitation.

‘You’re looking better for that,’ Benny told Andrea, ignoring Chromsky. ‘Perhaps Helena would benefit from a shot as well.’ She turned to the security officer. ‘I’m sure we can find another glass.’

‘I told you no alcohol.’ Chromsky was livid. The veins were standing proud on his temples and his face was reddening.

‘Why not?’ Benny asked. ‘Why the hell not?’

It took him a few moments to form his response. ‘The communications equipment is not working, possibly because of the technology-suppressing field. Until we find a way of validating that hypothesis and re-establishing communications, we all need to keep clear heads.’ He was quieter now, calmed by the comforting sound of his own voice. He pointed to Andrea. ‘This sort of hallucination is exactly the kind of thing we’ll suffer from if we let discipline slip. Right?’

Benny smiled. ‘So if I tell you how we can check whether the equipment doesn’t work because of a technology-suppressing field or for some other reason, you’ll lighten up a bit and let us relax in any reasonable adult manner?’

Chromsky’s eyes narrowed. ‘How?’

‘Well, this field, if it exists, can somehow knock out really hi-tech stuff without affecting the lower-level facilities like the lights or the essential systems like life-support. That suggests to me that it’s localized to certain areas and certain technologies.’

‘Maybe.’

‘Go on,’ Keven urged.

Benny shrugged. ‘The shuttle wasn’t affected when it brought us here, and I imagine its communications system was similar to the stuff we have here.’

Chromsky still looked puzzled, but Kerven and Phelps seemed to be catching on. Stuart was nodding enthusiastically. 'So if we take the equipment back out to the shuttle bay,' he said, 'it will work.'

'Depending on what's really wrong with it,' Kerven pointed out. 'It may just be...' He waved his hands in the air unable to complete the sentence.

'Bugged,' Benny offered. 'It's an archaeological term,' she explained.

Rather than dismantle all the communications equipment and then reassemble it again in the docking bay, Chromsky removed one small component. It was a meter that checked the strength of an incoming signal, and boosted it if it fell below a given threshold. The meter was self-powered and included its own built-in display of flashing lights to indicate whether there was a signal coming in, and if so how strong it was. It also had a standby light that showed it was powered on and waiting to monitor a call. At the moment, all the lights were as dead as the rest of the equipment.

Chromsky carried the meter, already suited up ready to enter the vacuum of the docking bay. In his other hand he carried his helmet.

Phelps and Helena stayed with Andrea in the mess. Stuart led the others back towards the docking bay. Benny recognized most of the path, amused to see the footprints leading back towards them from their initial journey along this route in the opposite direction. Lost somewhere among the other bootprints were her own.

Stuart keyed the unlocking sequence into the entry control by the airlock, and the heavy panelled door swung slowly open. Chromsky clicked the seals on his helmet, tested the pressure, and stepped into the airlock. There was a small observation port set into the door, but Benny, Stuart, Kerven and Hoyt made no attempt to watch. They just waited in the corridor.

'Will it work, do you think?' Hoyt asked.

‘Who knows?’ Kerven said. ‘About an even chance, I’d say.’

‘What if it doesn’t?’

‘Then we’re no worse off than we were before,’ Stuart said.

Benny had already reached this conclusion. She was also pretty sure it would not work. She was no expert, but the sort of selective field that Chromsky was advocating seemed rather a far-fetched idea to her. Still, she had seen and experienced some pretty far-fetched things in her time, so she kept an open mind. While they waited she looked again at the picture that Kerven had swept the cobwebs from when they had first arrived.

The girl was sitting unmoved since Benny first saw her. But the picture as a whole seemed clearer now. Partly, her eyes were accustomed to the flickering low lighting, and partly she had a better view than when she had peered over Kerven’s shoulder. In particular, what she could see now that she had overlooked before was the figure beyond the girl. As the girl concentrated on the butterfly resting delicately in her hand, smiling at its fragile beauty, a small boy was approaching her from behind. He was about the same age as the girl, perhaps her brother, and was dressed in knickerbockers and a short jacket. His hair was dark and slightly dishevelled where he had pulled his cap off in a hurry. The cap was now raised above his head, and from the glint of mischief in his dusty eye, Benny could tell that he meant to bring it down hard on the butterfly.

She turned away from the picture, the magic and innocence of the scene shattered by the intrusion of the boy. Like a happy half-memory spoilt when the less ideal other half is suddenly, inadvertently recalled. As she turned, the airlock door swung open, and Chromsky stepped out. He threw the meter at, rather than to, Hoyt, and then fumbled with the catches on his helmet.

‘It’s still bugged,’ he said through gritted teeth. A nerve ticked under his left eye as he seemed to fight with himself

over a decision. Finally he said quietly, 'Come on, I need a drink.'

They heard the scream of the alarm before they had taken ten paces.

The corridor was full of smoke. It was as if the dust had lifted and expanded, like a cloud about to burst into a thunderstorm. But the smell was acrid, catching at the back of the throat and making Benny first cough, then choke. The automatic systems had cut in, and the smoke was being visibly drawn away from the corridor, pulled through previously concealed grilles and ducts. The overall effect was of a swirling fog, which reminded Benny of Maryann Declleiter's funeral.

Chromsky had snapped his helmet back into place. He strode ahead of the others, disappearing into the mist. Benny battled on after him, forcing her way through the thinning cloud towards the muffled howl of the klaxon. It seemed to be coming from a short way ahead, perhaps from the officers' mess. But as she made her way forward, feeling her way along the wall of the passageway, Benny began to make out a pale glow from the side of the corridor. Before long she drew level with it, aware of Kerven and Hoyt close behind her.

The fire was in the galley, a kitchen area several doors down from the mess. Stuart had cleaned it out and claimed that the cooking equipment was in working order. When Benny had last seen it, the galley had looked scrubbed with shining steel surfaces like a hotel kitchen. Now it was alive with smoky flames that licked over the worktops. The main fire was a ball of orange light, its edges softened by the haze of smoke and by the heat. An oily black cloud hung in the air above the fire, the flames pushing outward from a solid mass of yellow and orange that seemed to be burrowing into the worktop.

As Benny watched, a denser, more solid jet of smoke lanced out towards the fire, biting at it. Chromsky's space-suited form was just visible through the unnatural fog as he directed an extinguisher towards the base of the flames. But

as soon as the jet of gas cut off, the fire roared back into life.

Benny caught at the door frame, balancing herself, catching what breath she could. Beside her, Kerven was leaning against the corridor wall, gasping. As they mirrored each other, almost retching with the effort to draw breath, Rawling Hoyt pushed between them and ran to help Chromsky.

Hoyt grabbed an extinguisher from its wall-mounting and directed it against the blaze. The gas from the extinguishers mingled with the smoke, making the fog denser. The fire fled from the jets of suppressant, keeping low and spreading out like a living, thinking animal looking for an escape route. It ran across the worktop, spilling away from the extinguishers and dripping in golden droplets to the galley floor.

Without warning, a spurt of orange-yellow flame lashed out across the worktop, jumping the gap between the surface and Rawling Hoyt. It curled itself around his arm, clutching, taking hold of him. His sleeve erupted in a mass of smoky fire, and with a scream he dropped the extinguisher.

Benny was still coughing and spluttering in the doorway. Kerven was doubled over and Stuart was a vague shadow in the mist behind them. Chromsky was winning his battle against the blaze, but he was turned away, apparently unaware of Hoyt's problems. It took Benny only a second to realize that if she failed to do anything to help, Hoyt would soon be engulfed by the fire. She staggered into the room, slipping slightly on the damp floor where the suppressant gas had condensed in a sheen. Hoyt's extinguisher lay abandoned on the floor, and she grabbed it, turning it towards Hoyt and shouting for him to look away. God knew what the gas might do to his eyes.

Hoyt was on his knees, rocking to and fro. His arm was a blazing mass, without shape or substance, lost inside the swirling retina-smearing patterns of the fire. The sudden spray of mist in turn engulfed the flames, the high-pitched hiss of the extinguisher mingling with the sounds of Hoyt's screams. Then the mist cleared as the ventilation systems

finally overcame the smoke, and Hoyt pitched forward on to his face.

Chromsky was predictably unsympathetic. Rather than praising Hoyt for helping to fight the fire, he chided him for his negligence. For once, Hoyt looked as if he didn't care what Chromsky thought. He sat straight and still in a chair in the medical centre, pale under the smoke stains that blackened his face. Phelps had finished bandaging his arm, and was easing it into a sling. Benny and Stuart, who had both come along to see if they could help, watched without saying anything.

Perhaps realizing his comments were having no effect, Chromsky finished with a muttered 'incompetent, ignorant moron', and stamped out of the room.

'Those are some of the most sophisticated words I've heard him use,' Phelps said as the door closed behind Chromsky.

Benny was about to reply. But at that moment the ghost came in.

It was a woman, and she looked as solid and real as any of them. The only clue that she was not was that the door did not open to admit her. Rather, she faded into view in front of the door, walked across the room, looked round, then walked back towards the door. As she passed Benny, who was standing silent and surprised like the others, the woman paused. She turned to look back into the room, looking at - through - Benny as she did.

She was in her early twenties, well-applied make-up emphasizing her strikingly pretty features. She was dressed in a long, lemon-yellow evening gown. Her eyes were a deep blue as they focused somewhere beyond Benny. Benny recognized her at once from Braxiatel's briefing. She was Bettyana Quist, from the original crew of the *Medusa*. The only difference from the picture of her that Benny had seen was her hair. In the picture it had fallen loose and long over her shoulders in large curls. Now she had it tied up, pulled aggressively clear of her neck and ears, scraped back from

her high forehead into an intricate blonde plait. A long curled lock hung free against each cheek, a designer wisp that had been allowed to escape for effect.

Bettyana Quist pursed her lips, pressing them together firmly enough to show some degree of dissatisfaction, but not so firmly that it disturbed her lipstick. Then she turned on her heel and vanished. For a few moments longer, the percussive slap of her footsteps on the metal floor lingered in the air. Then it too faded into nothing.

For dinner that evening, Benny and Helena Gyles put out a cold buffet in the mess. The vacuum-sealed food in the galley was in good shape, and they had brought some supplies of their own. As they were finishing the preparations, Forsyth Kerven arrived.

‘Can I do anything to help?’ he asked. His voice was quiet and calm as ever.

Helena seemed not to hear him, although she was closer than Benny. Benny smiled and told him, ‘I think we’re about done, if you want to round everyone up and let them know.’

People arrived almost together. When everyone except Andrea Moritz was there, they started to help themselves to food as if by some common assent. They ate in silence for a while, until Benny asked brightly, ‘Has anyone else seen a ghost today?’

‘What?’ Chromsky demanded.

‘A supernatural being,’ Stuart said helpfully. ‘A spirit, a phantasm, a wraith.’

‘A ghost,’ Benny repeated. We saw one, down in the medical centre just after you left. I wondered if anyone else had experienced something similar. ‘

‘There’s no such thing as ghosts,’ Chromsky barked, sending crumbs across the room.

‘Well, we certainly saw something,’ Stuart told him.

‘Indeed,’ Phelps agreed. Hoyt did not comment. He was still in shock, pushing his food round his plate with his good hand.

'Well,' Kerven said, clearing his throat, 'I did see something, actually. Or thought I did. In the forward section. Just a glimpse.'

'Of what?' Stuart asked.

'A figure. I thought it was one of you, so I called out. Whoever it was didn't answer, so I went over to see who it was.'

'And who was it?'

'I don't know. When I got there, there was nobody.'

'Hah!' Chromsky set his plate down heavily on a table. 'Stuff

and nonsense. That's what it is - stuff and nonsense.'

'So you've seen nothing?' Benny asked him.

'Of course not. Load of -' He broke off, his permanent frown deepening as he looked past Benny towards the door.

Benny turned. Beside her, she heard Phelps draw in his breath in surprise.

Andrea Moritz was standing in the doorway. 'What's the matter with you?' she asked icily. 'Never seen a girl dress for dinner before?' She was wearing a long dress, a slit up the side allowing her leg to escape as far as the thigh. Her face was made up as immaculately as ever. But what had made Benny's blood chill and her spine tingle was Andrea's hair. Normally it hung in a perfect black bob to her shoulders. But now she had tied it up, scraping it back from her forehead and pulling it away from her ears. A dark strand curled gently down her cheek, as if it had escaped. It was perfectly balanced by another against Andrea's other cheek.

'This is not a pleasure cruise,' Chromsky snarled. He pushed past Andrea and left.

Benny glanced at Stuart. He was staring back at her, concern and worry etched across his face.

The lights flickered round him as Chromsky made his way along the passage towards his cabin. He paused at the door, unsure whether to go in. He decided instead to walk a little further, to try to work off some of his frustrated energy. He was confused and angry. He needed time to think.



This should have been an easy mission. Straightforward. The only complications were under his control, were ones he knew about. Or so he thought. Now, somehow, it was all falling apart. He was in danger of losing control, and he had sworn to himself that would never happen. Not again.

The flickering was faster now, rhythmic. The dusty splendour of the passage was lit in the strobing flashes of an old vidcast. Chromsky closed his eyes, trying to blink away the headache he could feel coming on. The light flashed against his eyelids, an orange glow interlaced with darkness. Gradually the orange increased and the darkness receded. He opened his eyes, slowly, cautiously.

The corridor was clean. The carpet on the floor was plush, the wooden panels polished and shining. The wall lights cast a constant clear glow, illuminating the vivid colours of the paintings beneath them. Chromsky staggered back a pace, felt himself swaying dangerously, and closed his eyes again, covering them with the heels of his hands.

He was imagining it, he had to be imagining it. The stress. There were no ghosts, no apparitions, no hallucinations. It was just the overactive imaginings of a nervous crew. Or perhaps a practical joke, an effort to unsettle him. None of it was true. The corridor beyond his hands was dusty, decaying, strewn with cobwebs and littered with the debris of decades of abandonment.

Chromsky took a deep breath. He could almost taste the dust in the air - he was sure he could. He forced his hands away from his face, and in a sudden effort opened his eyes. And saw the dusty decay of the corridor exactly as he had hoped. Hoped, if not expected. He let out his breath, the sound artificially loud in the still of the passageway. Then he laughed, shook his head, and continued on his way.

Quite where he was headed he was not sure. Just to walk, to clear his head, to see more of the ship was a comfort. Ought to be a comfort. He was in control, the images and the ghosts were gone - had never been there.

At the end of the passage was an open area. The lighting was better here, and Chromsky paused. Had he come full

circle? The area was clean, tidy. The lights were working. The furniture was pushed back against the walls to make room for a large table, on which was spread a buffet. He must have returned to the area near the officers' mess. They must have arranged a part of the buffet here, perhaps to follow the main course. There was fruit, cheese, gateaux.

He ran his finger along the top of the table as he walked past. It came away clean. He paused by a large fruit bowl, suddenly aware that he was still hungry. He should not have walked out of the mess, but they were pushing him right to the edge. Something would have to be done. Ghosts indeed! He reached for an apple, selecting the reddest, ripest one from the bowl.

He lifted the apple out without disturbing the other fruit. He looked round as he raised it to his lips. Yes, the mess must be... But wait, that couldn't be right. Now he came to think about it, there was no way he could have doubled back: the corridors he had come along had been straight, and he had not turned away from his initial course.

The realization came just as the apple met his parted lips, brushed against his teeth. It was like biting into the earth of a grave. Dry, decayed, rotted, dead. He flinched, trying to spit the dust from his mouth. He stared in horror at his hand, at the thing it held.

It might once have been an apple. It was the same general shape. But now it was a lump of grey powdery ash. One side was discoloured. A dribble of dark viscous liquid was seeping out of the side where he had bitten into it. The stench was incredible, and his hand clenched involuntarily on the object. It exploded under the pressure, showering Chromsky with dust. He breathed it in as he gasped. It stuck at the back of his throat as he coughed. It clung in his eyes even as the tears welled up, trying in vain to wash them clean again. A sticky stinking mass remained clinging to his hand. Beyond it, Chromsky could see the decaying remains of an ancient meal. The fruit was powdered sculpture; the cheese was rancid blue; the gateaux were alive with a writhing mass of maggots.

He sank to his knees, retching violently. His hands clawed at the dusty floor, pulled up shreds of withered carpet as his sobs echoed round the empty room.

Within a day they had all become quite blasé about the apparitions. It amazed Benny how quickly she and the others seemed to adapt to the unusual. But there seemed to be no harm in the ghosts that now and again passed them in corridors, or sat and ignored them in the open areas between corridors. Apart from the dizzy spells that Benny was still suffering. She had not been entirely herself for the whole trip, and now she put it down to the occasional flash impressions of the former splendour of the ship - a minor inconvenience, disorientating but not threatening.

Forsyth Kerven voiced his opinion that the images they were seeing were of the original passengers and crew of the *Medusa*. Benny agreed that this made sense, without revealing that she knew he was right. She tried to sound suitably learned and detached as she talked about apparitions and haunted houses. She ad-libbed about time rifts and nascent stored memories.

Only Chromsky seemed unable to accept what was happening. While everyone else ignored it, he denied it. Any mention of the ghosts was met with a shout of 'stuff and nonsense', usually followed by a torrent of abuse. He was getting louder and coarser. Conversations stopped when he entered the room, and increasingly he remained in his cabin, emerging only rarely to shout orders and demand updates on the investigation.

On one occasion he was actually in the mess with Benny, Helena and Stuart when one of the ghosts walked in. Benny recognized the smartly dressed man with steel-grey hair and a trim moustache as Rathbone Quarrel. Helena and Stuart stood aside needlessly to let him pass obliviously by. Chromsky stared long enough for it to be obvious that he had seen the apparition. Then he continued as if nothing had happened, and denied he had seen anything at all.

The way the investigation proceeded was soon routine. Kerven, often with Helena's quiet help, would map out an area of the ship and note any discrepancies with the plans he had. Benny would then go through the area looking for archaeological evidence for what might have happened. Usually Stuart helped her, and she found herself growing accustomed to his company, and missing it when he wasn't there.

After Benny had finished examining an area, Phelps moved in to collect forensic evidence. He had at first tried to persuade Andrea to help him, talking her through the detail of what he was doing like a patronizing parent. But she had soon become bored with this, and he seemed to have all but given up asking. Instead he was as intolerant of Hoyt's help as he had been deferential to Andrea. Hoyt, his arm still unusable and in a sling, did his best and was obviously upset by Phelps's constant chiding, which was every bit as severe if not as loud as Chromsky's. Benny felt sorry for Hoyt, and when she could she arranged for him to help her and Stuart. She found him quiet but willing, if a little naive.

On the third day, Benny and Stuart were working their way through a new area when they came across the captain's cabin. It was marked clearly on Kerven's plans, and they hesitated outside the door, full of expectation and excitement. Here was one of the few rooms that had actually been occupied on *Medusa's* maiden voyage. Most had been empty, and had no story whatsoever to tell. Being the cabin that Captain Kallis Shaw had occupied made this stateroom doubly interesting.

'Shall we?' Benny asked, her hand on the tarnished brass door handle.

Stuart considered. 'No, forget it,' he said and they both laughed.

Benny pushed the door open, waiting in the corridor to let the dust settle. But there was no dust. The room was spotlessly clean. Every surface had been polished till it shone. The door opened into a study area. The plans showed

that the bedroom was off to the left. In front of Benny and Stuart was a large mahogany desk. Above it a huge oval window rimmed with a shining brass surround gave out on to space. The stars were bright pinpricks of light against the velvet black background.

The man sitting at the desk paid them no heed and Benny and Stuart walked slowly towards him. He had his back to them, and was looking up and out into the void. His hair was brushed back, receding from his lined forehead. His eyes were deep-set and his beard was an uncontrolled mass of dark stubble.

In front of him on the desk was a large notebook. As Benny and Stuart approached, he set down the antique fountain pen he had been writing with, and closed the book. He capped the pen, and placed it carefully to the side of the desk, perfectly aligned with the edge of the blotter. He lifted the book, as he pushed himself back slightly from the desk and pulled open a drawer. The notebook was bound in dark-red leather; gold bands stamped on to the cover seemed to hold it together. He placed the book carefully in the drawer, then closed it and locked it. He took the small key from the lock, and made to put it in his jacket pocket as he stood up. But then he seemed to change his mind, and instead he bent down and pushed it gently against the leg of the desk so that it was lost in the shadows and the pile of the carpet. Then he straightened up, turned towards Benny, and vanished slowly into the ether.

Stuart and Benny both coughed as dust swirled round them. The room was crisscrossed with cobwebs, and when Benny turned back she could see the path they had taken through them. She pointed it out to Stuart.

‘So,’ he said, ‘it is a form of hallucination. It’s not that we actually went back in time for a while.’

‘No,’ Benny agreed. ‘They come forward to us. Somehow.’

‘*Medusa* remembers.’

‘Perhaps.’ Benny bent down and reached under the desk. ‘And perhaps *Medusa* has given us our first real clue.’ She held up the rusty key for Stuart to see.

‘You don’t think the bodies are a clue, then?’

The lock was stubborn. She twisted the key hard to get it to turn, but still it refused. So she gave up and gave the drawer a tug. ‘The bodies are evidence. After the fact.’ The drawer opened with a shower of dust. The lock was still out, and there was a splintered gouge through the wood where the lock had previously been forced. Benny reached inside and drew out the book. Its cover was faded and worn. ‘This is a clue. The captain’s log.’

‘Strictly speaking, a clue is anything which pertains to the solution of a mystery or a problem.’

Benny ignored him. She set the book down on the desk and they both leant over as she opened the cover.

*Logbook of Medusa*  
*Maiden ‘Voyage*  
*Captain Kallis Shaw*

The handwriting was a neat swirl, the ink a faded black. The pages were thick and brittle with age, yellowed at the edges. Benny turned to the back of the book, then forward through the pages until she came to the last entry. She found it easily, the book opening almost immediately to the right point. She ran her finger down the spine, and felt the ragged edge where several pages had been torn out. A fragment of paper cracked under the pressure.

‘Maybe it’s not such a clue after all,’ Stuart murmured.

Benny did not answer. She was reading through the entry on the previous page. ‘Look at this.’ Her voice was husky and dry. She pointed to a phrase. “‘Stuff and nonsense”,’ she read. She looked up at Stuart. ‘Who do we know who uses that phrase? Someone who has started using it recently?’

Stuart nodded. ‘Read on,’ he said grimly. ‘Do you see what he’s describing?’

Benny scanned ahead. ‘There was a fire. In the galley.’ She looked up at Stuart, then back at the book. “‘I *managed to bring the blaze under control. We are still trying to isolate the exact cause,*”‘ she read. “‘*The only minor casualty was*

*Miles Betton, who burnt his arm through carelessness while helping fight the fire. Vasco Playdon bandaged his arm, and he has it in a sling.”“*

At the end of the entry, scrawled less carefully, as if as an afterthought, were three words. Benny read them aloud, but the voice she heard was not her own. In her mind's ear Heath Chromsky was snarling the words at Rawling Hoyt in the sickbay.

*‘Incompetent, ignorant moron.’*

## CHAPTER 5

*I don't remember how long we stayed there, hugged close. Father and daughter.*

*I hated every minute of it, prayed for Father to take me away from the rich kids with their designer clothes. The uniforms made us all equal, or so I thought. But inside, deep down, I knew who and what I was. Never admit it, though, never admit your mistake - that's the key.*

*And every time she looked through me I felt a piece of me die. Insignificant, alone, afraid.*

*I keep the diary to remind myself who I am. To remember. To remember the good and the bad. Yet I forget. Am I the commander who cannot admit a mistake? The diarist who writes the might-have-beens as well as the regret and the rose-tinted memories?*

*I just wanted to be a father to her. The daughter I never had. I saw how Betton watched her, almost drooled over her, and tried to protect her from it. My poor innocent.*

*I clutched it to me, my words, my life. In the darkness before the tank, before the world cracked open into light and colour, I clutched at my words, my testament. Small girl, afraid and alone in the blackness. I held my father tight and felt his sobs echo through me.*

*I am in darkness even now. Whoever - whatever - I am.*

*Oh God.*

*Help me remember. My memories. My life. Not yours.*

\* \* \*

Benny snapped her diary shut and laid it down on the dressing table. She was feeling a little dizzy again, slightly light-headed. She glanced at the half-empty bottle of wine standing beside the diary, and immediately dismissed it as a possible contributing factor. Half a bottle of wine might make



her light-headed, but the dizzy spells were becoming worryingly frequent. And it wasn't *that* sort of dizzy.

She closed her eyes and leant back in the chair. Time to get some sleep. Tomorrow would be a busy day. Boring, but busy. She opened her eyes, traced the patterns in the plaster-work of the ceiling, watched a tiny spider crawl along the join between ceiling and wall. Where did they come from? How did they get on board and then survive for so long? There was a whole spider culture aboard *Medusa*, and its history could be even more interesting than that of the long-deceased passengers and crew.

Or maybe not, Benny thought. They were still no closer, it seemed, to discovering the circumstances of the deaths aboard *Medusa*. Rather, things were becoming more complicated. There were the ghosts, who seemed harmless enough but were a weird phenomenon to say the least. There were the pages torn from the logbook, and the coincidence of the fire in the galley and Hoyt's burnt arm. More than that, there was the coincidence of phraseology. Maybe they also taught grammar and vocabulary at whatever training school loud arrogant space captains attended. Maybe Chromsky and Kallis Shaw had shared a teacher, even.

More coincidence.

And Benny remembered Braxiatel telling her that coincidence was something to be wary of, was something that did not really exist but was engineered.

She picked up her diary, and opened it to the section she had just written. She barely remembered writing it, she realized. She would read through it once, perhaps amending the wording slightly. Then she really should get some sleep.

*It's Rawling Hoyt I feel most sorry for. Not just his arm, though that's sad. But his obvious infatuation with Andrea Moritz. She's a real cow. Talk about prima donna. She can't sit down without Phelps pulling out the chair a bit for her.*

*He dotes on her, Hoyt. He just can't see it. And she ignores him. In this diarist's opinion that stinks. But I doubt one could*

*persuade him of the folly of his ways. He's just a kid after all. I remember when I was a kid. Jeffry Anders - remember him?*

*Chromsky is shouting even more. He appears to be losing it completely. He seems to stay alone in his cabin for most of the time, only emerging when there is something he wants to yell at someone about.*

*Kerven and Phelps get on with their work. Phelps is a pain, rather too condescending and arrogant for this diarist's liking... Kerven, on the other hand, is a real gentleman. That said, Helena Gyles seems to have taken against him, ignores him at every opportunity despite the fact she often helps with the surveying.*

*And then there's Stuart. He's weird. Quiet, but complex. In fact, in a team of caricatures and extremes he's the most balanced of the lot. Maybe that's why he seems a little odd - because he's so normal.*

*Signing off now.*

Benny stared at the page. Her head was spinning now. The image in the mirror over the dressing table was a blurred, half-silvered reflection. Her, yet not her. Recognizable, but different.

The words were hers, but yet not her own. She read through it again, head pounding. This diarist...' The phrase was repeated. Did she write that? She could not remember, but it didn't sound like her style. Had she ever written that before? Certainly she didn't recall ever finishing an entry with 'Signing off now'. And who the hell was Jeffry Anders?

The world seemed to flicker in front of her eyes. She stood up shakily, holding the back of the chair for support. In the mirror, her alter ego shimmered as it stared uncertainly back at her. Then Benny turned and stumbled towards the bed.

The mess was empty apart from Forsyth Kerven when Benny made her bleary way towards the coffee the next morning. She had slept badly. She did not remember waking, or what

she had dreamt. But she felt like death, and her head was still throbbing.

‘Ah, Anni. Good morning.’ Kerven raised his mug to her in greeting.

‘Benny,’ she said. ‘It’s Benny. Remember?’

Kerven frowned. ‘Of course it is.’

Benny poured a stream of steaming coffee into the thick plastic mug. The aroma was strong, inching her back towards reality as she breathed it in. ‘You called me Anni.’

Kerven shrugged. ‘Whatever.’ He was leaning back in an armchair. His face was in shadow.

Benny helped herself to a biscuit from a plate beside the coffee. ‘Did Helena lay this on?’

Kerven nodded. ‘She’s a good girl.’

Benny sipped at the coffee. She wanted to gulp it down, but it was too hot. ‘Yes. I’m not sure she cares too much for you, though.’

Kerven said nothing, but tilted his head slightly to one side and smiled. As he moved, his face came into the light. The beginnings of a thin grey moustache bristled above his top lip.

Benny and Stuart spent the first part of the morning continuing the painstaking process of recording everything in the captain’s cabin. Without the use of NotePads with their speech-to-text capability, the task of making a note of every artefact and its relative position and condition was considerably more lengthy and tedious. But, like all the other equipment they had brought with them, the NotePads refused to work.

They started at the door and worked slowly inward, towards the desk. Apart from the discovery of a bottle of vintage Eridanean brandy in the top drawer of a mahogany filing cabinet, there was little of interest to record. After a couple of hours, Benny suggested they take a break. They headed back towards the mess for coffee.

Benny noticed the smell as they entered the open area ahead of the mess. It was the heavy, slightly acrid smell of

tobacco. A curl of thin bluish smoke rose lazily over the back of an armchair. A pair of feet wearing tartan carpet slippers were visible resting on an upholstered footstool.

As Benny and Stuart approached, Dorian Phelps leant round the armchair to see who had entered the area. A large cigar was clamped between his lips, a wisp of smoke escaping from the end of it. He removed the cigar, holding it between two fingers and inspecting the smoke that escaped from it, adding to it by blowing a steady stream from his mouth. 'How's things?' he asked jovially. 'Having fun?' Before Benny or Stuart could answer, he leant back into the chair and disappeared from their sight. 'Ah, this is the life.' His voice floated to them on the tobacco smoke.

'Shouldn't you be doing the forensics in the forward section?' Benny asked. But she got no answer. Phelps was leaning back with his eyes closed. He was wearing a dark-blue velvet jacket and slacks, and he was blowing smoke rings into the dusty air. But, despite his relaxed posture, his face seemed more lined, more angry than Benny remembered.

'Come on,' Benny said to Stuart.

'Where to?'

'I don't see why we should be the only ones doing any work round here. I'm going to ask Chromsky what's going on.'

Stuart gave a short laugh, and followed her down the corridor. 'Rather you than me.'

'You *and* me,' she told him, stopping in front of Chromsky's door. She waited till Stuart was standing squarely beside her, then knocked once, and pushed the door open.

Chromsky was sitting at a large desk set against the far wall of the cabin. Above the desk an oval window gave out on to the starscape of space outside the ship. He turned as the door opened, and Benny could see the large leather-bound notebook open on the desk in front of him, the antique fountain pen poised in his right hand.

'What the hell do you want?' Chromsky shouted as he glared at Benny and Stuart.

Benny gaped, momentarily at a loss for words.

‘Nothing,’ Stuart said quietly from beside her. ‘Nothing at all. Sorry to have disturbed you, sir. ‘ He pulled the door gently but firmly shut.

Benny watched Chromsky turn back to his log even as the image was cut off by the closing door. ‘I don’t believe it,’ she said as Stuart led her along the passageway towards the mess. ‘I can’t see Chromsky keeping a log. Not a handwritten log. Can you?’

‘I don’t know him well enough,’ Stuart admitted, ‘though it seems a little out of character. ‘

‘Then why the sudden exit? Scared his bite might be as big as his bark?’

Stuart paused, then he turned to face Benny. ‘I don’t know him very well,’ he said. ‘But I do know that yesterday he was left-handed.’ He put his hand on her shoulder, just for a second. Then he walked on down the corridor.

Benny caught him up. She was trying to think back, trying to recall whether he was right about Chromsky. She seemed to remember an awkwardness in shaking hands with him when they had first met at the Advanced Research Department. But the act of remembering seemed to make her head throb even more than it already was. Her headache and slight dizziness seemed constant now. ‘Well at least things can’t get much worse,’ she said as they reached the mess.

They went inside. Things got worse.

Rawling Hoyt was standing just inside the door. He was dressed immaculately in a dark-blue suit. His left arm was still in a sling, but in his right hand he held a polished salver on which were several glasses of orange juice. The cuff of his jacket was ringed with a single band of gold braid. He looked as though he had been waiting for them, smiled politely and inclined his head slightly as Benny and Stuart exchanged worried glances. Stuart helped himself hesitantly to a glass. Benny declined.

With the exceptions of Phelps and Chromsky, both of whom they had already seen, everyone was in the mess. Andrea Moritz was lounging on a sofa, looking sideways at Forsyth Kerven as she sipped a predominantly pink cocktail from a

tall glass. Kerven looked across at Benny and Stuart as they came in. Andrea ignored them.

Standing by the wall behind Kerven's chair, so still that Benny almost failed to notice her, was Helena Gyles. She was dressed in a similar suit to Hoyt's, her hands behind her back. She caught Benny's eye, and stepped forward.

'Can I get you something, Professor Summerfield? An aperitif, perhaps?'

Benny stared.

'Luncheon will be served in twenty minutes in the Hyperion Room,' Helena went on. 'Please take a seat while you wait.' She gestured to the armchair beside Kerven. The cuff of her suit jacket was ringed with two bands of gold braid.

Stuart had noticed it too. 'Chief steward?' he murmured close to Benny's ear. 'With Hoyt as the gofer?'

Benny did not reply. Instead she took Stuart's glass of juice from him and pressed it into Helena's surprised hand, which was still pointing to the chair. 'We'll see you there,' she said. 'We're not thirsty right now. But thanks.' She walked from the room without looking back, hoping that Stuart was following her.

Kerven's voice floated after her as she reached the door and brushed past Hoyt's deferential bow: 'Of course, the emphasis was very much on *pleasure* rather than *cruise*. I think we shall be proving that empirically, don't you Bettyana?'

'My head's throbbing,' Benny told Stuart as he caught up with her. 'I need a drink. A strong drink. And we both know where there is one.'

'Is that a good idea?'

'Alcohol is the only thing I've found that stops my headaches.' Benny sighed. 'Funny that, it used to be the other way round.'

'Comes with age, perhaps.'

'Are you trying to be funny?' Benny asked him. 'Or do you like having stitches in your forehead?'

When they arrived at Kallis Shaw's study, Benny went straight to the filing cabinet and took out the bottle of

brandy. Its dusty exterior must be unique aboard *Medusa*, she thought, in that it made the bottle more attractive rather than just dirty and old. She pulled the stopper out and tossed in on top of the cabinet, holding the bottle out to Stuart. He shook his head, and she wiped the top of the bottle on her sleeve.

Benny settled herself into the captain's chair. Stuart perched on the desk, watching as she took a good swig of the brandy. The bottle was almost empty and she had to tip it right back. Had Shaw drunk the lot, or had it evaporated while it lay neglected?

Her head began to clear almost immediately, and Benny swivelled back and forth in the chair. 'So,' she said, the liquid still burning pleasantly at the back of her throat, 'you think Helena and Rawling Hoyt have taken on the roles of stewards, and everyone else thinks they're on a pleasure cruise.'

'What do you think?'

'I think Andrea was at least halfway there already. '

They both laughed. But there was an underlying tension. The laughter was a release, an admission of worry as much as a recognition of humour.

'Let's go through it,' Benny said after another pull on the brandy. It was weird how it cleared her head. 'Let's say things out loud which we've hardly dared to think, and see if they sound as bizarre as we expect. '

'Bizarre.' Stuart shifted position slightly on the desk.

'Deviating fantastically from the customary or the expected.' He moved the fountain pen to give himself more room. 'OK. Well, I don't know what's going on here, and I know even less about the first voyage of this ship. But from what I've read in the log there -' he gestured to the desk drawer where Kallis Shaw's logbook lay '- I'd say there are some interesting similarities.'

Benny nodded. 'Like the fire in the galley.'

'And Hoyt getting burnt. Like the other guy.'

'Miles Betton. Yes.'

‘Have you also noticed,’ Stuart asked, ‘that some of the time people call each other by the wrong names?’

‘Yes. Kerven called me Anni this morning,’ Benny admitted.

‘And then there are the ghosts, of course.’ Stuart rubbed his chin. ‘You’ve seen how Andrea’s doing her hair now. Like the woman we saw in the medical centre.’

Benny swung her legs in the kneehole of the desk. ‘Right,’ she said at last, ‘cards on the table. I do know something about the original voyage. More in fact than most people on board, except perhaps Kerven.’

‘And?’

‘And there are indeed some similarities. More than you think. I’ve seen the crew and passenger records, for example. The woman we saw in the medical centre was Bettyana Quist.’

Stuart raised a finger. ‘Bettyana - that’s what Kerven called Andrea just now.’

‘Exactly. And she’s doing her hair like Bettyana too.’

‘What was that you said about it sounding bizarre?’

They sat in silence for a while. Benny tried to arrange her thoughts into some sort of order. Eventually she said, ‘Kerven is growing a moustache, like Rathbone Quarrel, one of the original passengers. Chromsky is keeping a log and has become right-handed.’

‘Like the previous captain - Shaw.’

‘Phelps is smoking cigars. Maybe Vasco Playdon smoked. They’re alike in character, similar ages I think.’

‘And the others?’ Stuart asked. ‘Rawling Hoyt was burnt like Miles Betton.’

‘And he’s turned into a steward. Betton was a steward. The chief steward was a woman called Martia Lupis.’

‘Helena?’

‘Could be,’ Benny said. ‘She seems rather more contrite, more willing to do things for others than she was. Less independent.’

‘And what did Kerven call you, did you say?’

‘Anni. And Anni Goranson was the other passenger.’



Stuart sucked his cheeks in. 'What's the next stage up from bizarre?' he asked. 'Fantastic, or grotesque?'

Benny's foot connected with something under the desk. Something other than cobweb. It was solid, it shifted. It went clang. She peered underneath, feeling with her foot. 'It doesn't work, though,' she said as she probed. 'There were four passengers on *Medusa's* maiden voyage, and three crew. That makes seven.' She leant down and groped at the area beyond her feet, pulling out a metal waste bin. 'There are eight of us.' She nodded to emphasize the point. She could feel a slight dizziness from the brandy now. She dropped the empty bottle into the bin.

'True. But there's something weird going on, and it's linked to whatever happened on that first voyage.' He was staring out of the misty window, off into space. 'So many mysteries,' he said quietly.

'Yes.' Benny drew the word out. There was something else wrong, something at the edge of her realization. Something out of joint. What was it?

'Who are we?' Stuart breathed, so quietly that Benny barely heard him.

But she wasn't listening anyway. 'It didn't go clang,' she said, sitting suddenly upright.

'What didn't?' Stuart turned to face her, frowning.

'The bottle. When I dropped it in the bin just now.' She dived under the desk, scrabbling among the broken cobwebs for the waste bin. 'It should have gone clang, but it didn't.'

She emerged, brushing the dust from her eyes and nose as she set the bin down on top of the desk. The top of the rusted metal cylinder was a tapestry of cobwebs sprinkled with dust. She pulled them apart and took out the empty brandy bottle. Then she angled the bin towards the flickering wall light.

She was right: there was something in the bin, paper by the look of it. She reached inside and pulled out several sheets of notepaper. They were pages torn from the end of Shaw's log. And they were burnt. Benny put the paper down on the blotter, teasing the pages gently apart. The edges were

blackened and burnt, stuck together by the heat. But most of the middle of each page was intact.

Stuart watched her as she pulled the remains of the pages apart and arranged them in order. It's not the same handwriting,' he said.

Benny agreed. The handwriting was indeed noticeably different. It was more rounded with flourishes and whirls that Shaw's own businesslike hand had not exhibited. They read through the pages in silence, picking their way through the fragments. It helped that there were sections that the fire had not touched, mainly in the middle of each page. But equally, there was more that had been lost for ever.

*...partly out of a sense of duty, a feeling that the logbook should be kept up to date, completed. I knew where he kept the key to the desk - hardly difficult to find. So here I am. Partly, I suppose, it makes a change from keeping my own diary. This log is - will be - an account of events that have occurred. Impartial, objective. Not the personal recollections and aspirations of a diary. Not the hopes and fear's, the predictions and the retractions... frightening...*

*...spending more and more time alone in his cabin, emerging only to shout his orders and complain about the state of things. Cut off, without communications, he seems somehow to have lost his edge, his reason almost... as they occurred...*

*...his body. I don't know why, and it doesn't much matter, but I was on the lower decks. I could not sleep, and increasingly I find the company of the others irritating. Disturbing almost. They seem to resent my presence, somehow to blame me for what is happening here. So I read much of the evening, write my diary, and wander the endless empty corridors...*

*...shouting. Then the echoing sounds of movement, heavy and violent. The sound seemed to emanate from every one of the corridors, through the pipework and the machinery. By the time I had orientated myself, found the source among the echoes and the false trails, the sound had stopped. Cut off. Abrupt. I...*

*...slumped against the wall. There was a dark smear down the wall behind him, and his head had nodded forward so that I could see the mess of blood and shattered bone matted into his thinning hair...*

*...fallen. Slipped, lost his balance, pitched off a gantry. Who knows...*

*Vasco Playdon has some medical expertise, but even I could tell at once that he was beyond Playdon's help. I watched from the shadows, hid from them. I don't know why. They put him in a casket, in the medical centre. When the lid closed, shutting off the light that shone in on his pale features, the sound was like the snapping shut of his logbook Closed for ever. And at that moment, I knew I had to write of his death, to close the book on Shaw's life...*

At the bottom of the last page was a final line, three or four words all but obliterated by the fire. The shape of the sentence seemed familiar though, significant. 'What does that say, do you think?' Benny asked Stuart.

He lifted the brittle paper carefully and held it close, the guttering light behind it, as he peered at the words. 'Three words,' he said at last. 'The last one, I think, is *now*.' He set the paper back down on the desk. 'That could start with an o. It's a short word. The first one finishes with *i-n-g*.' He shrugged. 'Difficult to tell.'

Benny traced her finger carefully under the words. Even so she could feel the edges of the charred paper rubbing away beneath her touch. The phrase was gone, impossible to read. But she knew what it said.

'Signing off now,' she murmured.

'Yes,' Stuart said. 'Yes, that could be it.'

Stuart led the way. He had agreed with Benny's suggestion at once. She had a bad feeling about this, and he seemed to share her concerns. Checking the lower decks, even a cursory look round, might help to exorcise some of the ghosts - the ones in the mind if not the apparitions that periodically appeared in front of them.

‘You never know,’ Benny remarked as they made their way down the service stairs, her voice echoing off the bare metal of the stairwell, ‘we might get an action replay of what actually happened.’

It was like the basement of a large building, or the inside of a submarine. The ceiling was high, obscured by the intricately woven pipework and cables. The lighting was a dull red, but at least it did not flicker and die like the emergency lights Stuart had rigged up on the main decks.

‘Did you get the lights working here, too?’ Benny asked him. Not that she wanted to know, but the silence made her uneasy.

‘No. The emergency lighting here has always been working. I guess it gets priority.’

‘Makes sense. This is where the repairs would have to be done.’

They were speaking in low voices, almost whispering. Even so, the sound echoed, enveloping them. The pipes and cables above them were hung with cobwebs. In places they drooped down, forming curtains that cut off their sight of the deck area beyond. A large spider scuttled aside as the shadow of Benny’s foot fell across it.

‘Someone’s been here ahead of us,’ Benny said. She pointed to where the cobwebs hanging across the walkway had been torn aside.

Stuart reached out and touched the frail web. It stuck to his fingertips, pulling away as he withdrew his hand. Then suddenly it was gone.

The change was not so dramatic as when it occurred on the upper decks. The service area was still dusty and lit by the dim red lights. But the cobwebs vanished, and the ceiling seemed to rise as their view through the gaps between the polished pipes improved. Stuart reeled, clutching at his head, and Benny grabbed his arm to steady him. She felt the same, a sudden giddiness as time dropped away and they looked back at the ship as she had been twenty years ago.

Then the cobwebs faded back into sight. Stuart's hand was covered in the thin sticky strands, his face and hair whitened where he had smeared them.

'Whew,' he said. 'I hate it when that happens.'

Benny nodded. 'Unsettling. Though I think I'm getting used to it.' She watched the spider disappear into the gloom, apparently oblivious to the short time shift. A half-formed thought struck her. 'Is it to do with the spiders?' she asked as they walked. 'They get everywhere, though we rarely see them. Just the evidence of their passing.'

'The time jumps, you mean?'

'Yes.'

Stuart chuckled. 'Time spiders. Storing up the images of the past and replaying them later.'

'Something like that. What do you think?'

He stopped, turned to her, put his hands to the sides of her shoulders and looked into her eyes. Stuart's own eyes were deep and dark, his face lit sideways in blood red. 'I think,' he said quietly, 'that you might have had a bit too much of that brandy.'

She considered. 'Not convinced, then?'

'No.' He chuckled again. 'I've never heard anything so ridiculous in all my... all my experience.'

A comment died on Benny's lips as the dark red figure stepped through a wall of web beside them. The cobweb parted under the pressure as he pushed through what Benny had thought was a wall. He hefted a short section of metal pipe in his right hand, slapping it into his left palm. Benny took a step backward, Stuart beside her.

'Who the hell are you?' Chromsky asked, pointing the pipe directly at Stuart's head. He didn't let him answer. 'I knew it,' he snarled, raising the pipe. 'A stowaway.'

'What are you talking about?' Benny demanded.

'Step aside, Anni. I can handle this.' He took a step towards them.

Benny moved in front of him. 'This is Stuart. Remember? Stuart Stonely. What's wrong with you, Chromsky?'

Stuart eased Benny aside as Chromsky took another step towards them. 'I think he's gone, Benny. Flipped. Keep out of the way.' He raised his voice to Chromsky. 'Come on, you know who I am.'

Chromsky's eyes gleamed red in the gloom. A thin dribble of saliva escaped from the corner of his mouth. 'I certainly do.' His voice was quieter now. But it still had an edge to it, a twist of anger laced with disgust. 'You murdering bastard,' he screamed suddenly, and hurled himself at Stuart.

Stuart moved quickly. He pushed Benny away. She twisted as she hit the wall, turning back towards the two men. She saw Chromsky bring the pipe smashing down towards Stuart's head, saw him step aside so that the weapon connected with the wall behind him with a dull clang. Chromsky was frozen for a second, pipe against the wall. Stuart punched him in the stomach before he could recover, and Chromsky doubled up in pain.

'Now let's talk this through, shall we?' Stuart said. His voice was low and husky with anger and adrenaline.

Chromsky was coughing. Slowly he unfolded, turning to face Stuart. Stuart reached down to help him up, and it looked for a moment as if Chromsky would take his hand. But then he straightened up suddenly, swinging the heavy pipe in an arc at Stuart's head.

Stuart dived forward, under the blow. His shoulder connected with Chromsky's chest, sending the man flying backward, and the pipe was torn from his grip and sent clattering to the floor a short way down the corridor. Stuart landed with a heavy thump on the floor. Chromsky crashed into the wall, his head snapping backward and slamming into the metal.

The sound was like an egg cracking. It lingered in the dusty air while Stuart and Benny each picked themselves up. They were both covered in dust and cobweb. Stuart was breathing heavily, his face glistening with sweat. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand as he knelt down in front of Chromsky. Benny joined him.

Chromsky was sitting at the base of the wall, staring up at them. His mouth was open, a thread of saliva hanging from the corner. As Benny watched, it stretched, thinned, dripped. A string of red following it.

Then the body slumped forward, towards them. Chromsky's face landed in Benny's lap, and she found herself looking down at the shattered back of his head. It was a mess of blood and bone fragments matted into the thinning hair. The wall behind him was smeared with red where his head had slid down it after the impact.

Beside her, Stuart stood up. His hand was pressed to his forehead, and he swayed slightly on his feet. 'I remember,' he muttered. 'This happened before.'

'Yes.' Benny's voice was husky and cracked. Her throat seemed clogged with dust and the beginnings of a sob. 'It was in the log. In the burnt pages.' Her whole body started to shake. She felt Stuart's arm round her shoulder, saw Chromsky's shattered head through a moist haze of tears.

## CHAPTER 6

*Clarity. Like a shaft of sunlight - sunlight that I have never seen, never felt, despite having experienced its warmth on my back as the cold breeze blows against my face.*

*My father loved my mother. That was what I never realized. And I hated myself for that, even as I felt his warm arms enveloping me, keeping me safe for ever.*

*My father never took me home. He never came for me, and I hated him for it. But I could never admit that. My other father.*

*She ignored me. I hated her for it. I could have coped with her rejection, even her disgust. But there was nothing. As if I just did not exist. As if I were a nonentity. Nothing. But my memories are as good as the others', even if they are shorter. Less formed.*

*I wanted him. Not the snotty youth, the older, experienced man. And he ignored me.*

*She was desperate for me. But she was not what I wanted. She wanted me for the wrong reasons. And I had found what I wanted, I think, in those last few days.*

*It was me he had found. As I had found me. When he enveloped me in his arms, rocked me, I was back in the attic, with the box. Before the realization. Before I saw that he saw her in me.*

*We struggled. He was trying to kill me - I had to defend myself I pushed him away, that was all - I was just trying to escape. There had been enough killing already. God knows, I meant him no harm. But the harm was done. And they came for me.*

*Before we killed each other.*

*It becomes clearer. Who we are, at least, if not why we are who we are.*



Stuart led Benny back to her cabin. Her head was throbbing again, her thoughts a jumble of voices. It was as if there were some other person angling for space in her mind.

‘Let’s both get some rest, eh?’ Stuart suggested. ‘I’ll call in on you in a couple of hours, and see how you’re doing.’

‘Thanks.’

They had agreed not to mention Chromsky’s accident to the others just yet. For one thing, neither of them was at all sure how any of them would react. For another, there were still several questions they wanted better answers to. Or any answers at all.

Benny lay on the bed, restless, unable to settle. After half an hour of tossing and turning, unable to get comfortable for more than a few seconds she gave up. This was ridiculous. She obviously wasn’t tired. Her head was better now than it had been; the drumbeat of the blood in her brain had receded to a mere rushing in her ears.

She sat in front of the dressing table and looked into the mirror. She looked tired, even if she didn’t feel it. She pulled down an eyelid, checking to see if her eye was bloodshot. It was. She pulled her diary across the table towards her, flipping it open. She stared down at the most recent entry, at the words that were both her own and yet not her own. The writing seemed more ornate, more swirled than the previous entry. Or was it her imagination?

She closed the book and then her eyes again. When she opened them a few moments later she felt better. ‘I need a walk,’ she told herself. ‘I need to think.’ And she needed a clear head. She had finished the wine she had brought, and the brandy from Shaw’s cabin was gone. Helena Gyles would probably get her a drink if she asked, but she was not sure she was up to sitting it out with the weirdos right now. There was a bar along the corridor in the other direction, but that was still too close. So where?

She was already closing her cabin door gently behind her as she thought of the ideal place. She paused outside Stuart’s cabin, thought of knocking and asking him if he wanted to join her. But she didn’t. She needed to be alone for

a while. And there was still something about Stuart that unnerved her. Was it his style of speech? The slightly strange answers he sometimes gave without thinking? The fact that he never seemed to talk much about himself? Probably that was her imagination too. After all, she had found herself loathing Andrea Moritz recently, but not for any rational reason she could think of. True, she was a temperamental, self-centred prima donna. But Benny's profound feelings went deeper than that alone could explain.

She paused at the entrance to the mess. She had intended to go another way, but here she was now, without thinking. The door was open. Forsyth Kerven was leaning back in his chair, Andrea Moritz leaning over him, dangerously close. Her voice carried to Benny in a stage whisper. 'I could be so good for you, you know, Rathbone. So good.'

Behind them, Helena Gyles took a step forward, her icy guard dropping for a moment, her face twisted in disgust. Then she checked herself as Kerven somehow escaped from beneath Andrea. He placed his empty whisky tumbler on a nearby table, and buttoned his jacket. 'If you will excuse me.' He gave a short bow, polite, deferential. Distant. 'I have things to do.'

He passed by Benny without comment, lips set tight. The moustache was fully grown now, immaculately trimmed.

Benny watched him go down the corridor. As she turned back, Helena pushed past her. She headed in the opposite direction to Kerven. Rawling Hoyt's voice drew Benny's attention back to the mess.

'Miss Quist - Bettyana.' He was nervous, his voice slightly nasal and high-pitched. 'Can I -'

He reached out a hand towards her, but she cut him off abruptly: 'No you can't,' she shouted at him. 'Leave me alone. Just leave me alone.' She lashed out, swiping the glass tumbler from the table, knocking it across the room. Hoyt stepped back, as if burnt.

The tumbler was brittle with age. It hit the floor, exploding into a million fragments of sparkling glass. Andrea sank down in the chair where Forsyth Kerven had been sitting,

curling into it, hugging the cushion and burying her head in the upholstery of the arm.

Hoyt stood watching her still. His mouth was open in bewilderment.

Benny walked quietly over to him, laid her arm on his shoulder, squeezed. 'She's not worth it, you know,' she said quietly to him.

He turned, surprised. 'Anni?' he said in confusion. 'Anni?'

Benny found she remembered the way better than she had thought. She knew the way to the medical centre and from there was able to retrace the path they had taken that first day. The throbbing in her head was still a subdued rhythm. Her vision was slightly blurred, and she was feeling woozy. Maybe she had finally become an alcoholic. Was this what the craving, the dependence was like? Like being drunk - the unpleasant sort of drunk - when you hadn't had a drink, and clear-headed when you were over the edge?

She emerged on to the gallery with relief. Not far now. She seemed to float the short distance to the banister rail, and looked down into the ballroom. At once it shimmered and faded, and she gripped the rail tight. Then the image was solid again. The dance floor was polished and shining. The shattered pillar in the middle of the room was intact, a perfect companion for the other dozen pillars. The bar was scrubbed clean, the barman drying a wineglass with a white cloth. The light from the shining chandelier cast a clarity over the room that was unreal. The voices of the people at the tables and on the dance floor rose to meet Benny as she stood and watched.

And the beating rhythm in her head resolved itself into the music of the dance.

Benny turned from the rail as the pairs of dancers whirled across the polished floor beneath her, creating intricate patterns of swirling velvet and silk. The wide staircase could have been made for the occasion, swinging down and round majestically into the ballroom. She walked down the middle,

her gown spreading out behind her as it trailed down the steps.

A full-length mirror on the far wall showed Benny a reversed image of herself as she allowed the footman to take her hand and help her down the final step. He gave a short bow, his powdered wig ducking for a moment so she saw unhindered into the ballroom. The image of herself looked back, like a distant memory. A tall, slim figure that was herself yet not herself. The ball gown was a velvet green, wide at the bottom and close at the waist. Tastefully cut low over her bosom. But not *too* tastefully. Her gloves were tight, matching the sleeveless dress and reaching almost to her elbows.

Benny smiled at herself, and walked past her reflection into the ballroom. At once a waiter was at her elbow. She lifted the champagne flute with a gloved hand. Sipped carefully, felt her head clear.

Another hand lifted the glass from her, set it down on a table nearby. The man was about her age, a little younger if anything. His hair was short and dark, his eyes deep and pale, his shoulders broad and strong. Like the other men, he was wearing a suit and tuxedo. His grip was light but firm as he took her hand, held it high in his own and led her on to the dance floor.

There were half a dozen other couples in the waltz, turning smoothly in front of the huge picture window. Beyond them the stars winked and shone in the blackness of the space night.

For a while it was glorious. A short while. But as she spun, holding the hem of her dress in one hand, the shoulder of her partner with the other, Benny caught glimpses - snatches - of another room. It was the same ballroom, yet different. The glimpses were of a room layered in dust, hanging with cobwebs. The central pillar was shattered, the side ripped off. But whenever she tried to turn back, to focus on the image, it was gone. She made to cry out, to ask her partner what was happening, but no sound came from her lips. There was nothing but the music of the waltz. She tried to shout, to

scream, but he just smiled back at her, pressed his cheek close to hers, though he seemed to be looking away somewhere else, as the music slowed.

Then the whole dance slowed. The dancers seemed to balance and hold in mid-turn, their movements still smooth but sluggish. And as they danced, their clothes changed. The suits were no longer dark and clean. They became dusty and torn. The sumptuous gowns of the women sagged, as if the women themselves had lost the firmness of their shapes. The material faded unevenly. Then it tore, splitting apart with age, shredding and decaying. Rotting away. And the dancers were ageing too. Fading, rotting. Their handsome, beautiful features tore and fell away, revealing the decaying skeleton inside. The skull beneath the skin. For a moment a vestige of humanity clung to the face of Benny's partner. Then it too dripped away to leave a rotted, blackened skull, its grimace pressed to her cheek in a parody of a kiss.

She screamed, the sound escaping at last from her numb lips, and pushed away the corpse that had become a dead weight in her arms.

There was nothing. Nothing to push against. For a few seconds the unholy stench hung in the air, then it too was gone. Benny sank to her knees in the dust. Her footprints were a swirling, tangled jumble of scuff marks where she had danced alone across the stained and dirty floor. Her jeans were filthy. She felt a tear clean its way down her cheek as she looked up. She blinked.

The pillar, the central pillar, was still intact. Or rather, it was intact again. Benny stood up, stared at it. Medusa's carved face stared back, snakes writhing in her hair. Benny took a step towards the pillar, knowing even as she did so that this was not a good idea.

The sound was deafening, a sudden scream of breaking glass and of wood crying out in pain. She thought at first that the chandelier had snapped from its chain and crashed into the floor. But it still hung uncertainly above her, a dusty spider above the cobwebbed ballroom.

The pillar exploded outward with tremendous force. Glass and wood splinters showered down on Benny. She threw her hand up to protect her face, her eyes. The whole side of the pillar had cracked open and shattered. A torrent of dark viscous liquid poured through the opening, washing across the filthy floor towards her. It swirled round her feet, eddying round her boots. She hardly noticed. She watched in a transfixion of horror as a pale arm reached out from inside the pillar. The white hand clutched at the broken frame as if it were a door. A dark shadow balanced on the threshold.

Benny turned on her heels. The oily liquid splashed round her feet as she ran. Behind her, the shadow faded, and the liquid dried to a dark stain on the grimy floor. The ballroom was still, dusty and silent.

This time Benny did not pause as she passed the mess. Voices floated out at her. Phelps was shouting, and judging by the whine of the reply he was shouting at Rawling Hoyt. But Benny did not turn to look, she marched up to Stuart's cabin, purpose in her step, and knocked on the door.

'What's up?' he asked as soon as he opened the door. She could tell from his face that she must look in a state.

'I want to look at Chromsky's log,' she said. She had considered telling him about the ballroom, about what she saw, experienced there. How she ran in terror. But even replaying it in her own head, practising the words she might use as she made her way back towards Stuart's cabin, it sounded lame - a pale imitation of what had occurred. So she decided to keep it to herself.

Stuart caught up with her as she marched off down the corridor. 'You think there might be a clue as to what he was doing, what he was saying about stowaways or whatever?'

They were outside Chromsky's cabin now. 'I don't know.' Benny looked both ways down the corridor, checking they were unobserved. Then she tried the door. It was not locked, and she eased it open. They slipped inside, Stuart carefully shutting the door behind them.

‘Where do you suppose he kept it?’ Stuart looked round. ‘Where do you think?’ Benny went straight to the desk against the far wall. She tried the centre drawer. It didn’t move. She knelt down and felt for the key. Sure enough it was beside the desk leg, just where Shaw had hidden his key. She held it up for Stuart to see.

He shook his head. ‘I’m liking this less and less, you know.’

‘Me too.’ Benny unlocked the drawer and took out the leather-bound notebook. ‘I wonder where he found the book.’ She opened the log in the middle and flicked back through the pages until she found Chromsky’s final entry. She read it quickly, scanning through the familiar words. Then she handed the book to Stuart and let him read it. ‘How are you liking it now?’

His face was grim as he handed the book back to her. She set it down on the top of the desk and read through the last paragraph again.

*I managed to bring the blaze under control. We are still trying to isolate the exact cause. The only minor casualty was Rawling Hoyt, who burnt his arm through carelessness while helping fight the fire. Dorian Phelps bandaged his arm, and he has it in a sling. Incompetent, ignorant moron.*

Stuart looked over her shoulder. ‘What about the rest of it?’ he asked.

Benny riffled through the pages. She stopped at random, smoothing the pages flat. ‘The handwriting’s different,’ she said.

‘Not completely,’ Stuart said, ‘but there is something odd. It’s not so much that it looks like it was written by someone else. It’s not as extreme a change as that. More subtle.’ He thought for a moment. ‘As if someone were copying the writing.’

Benny shook her head. ‘No, there are some obvious differences, like the way the *t* is formed. They’d make the letters the same general shape.’ She turned the pages slowly, looking to see where and how the changes occurred. ‘It’s

more to do with the slant and flow of the text than its shape,' she said. 'The change here is quite abrupt, look.' A thought struck her. 'As if he were now holding the pen in his other hand.'

'Kallis Shaw's ghost,' Stuart said slowly, 'held the pen in his right hand.'

'And as you said, until a day or two ago, Chromsky was left-handed.'

'But not any more.'

Benny snapped the book shut and replaced it in the drawer. She locked the drawer and returned the key to its hiding place on the floor.

'So, Chromsky was becoming more like Kallis Shaw,' Benny said. 'Some sort of affinity, perhaps.' She flopped down in the chair at the desk, swivelled it to face Stuart. He slumped down into an armchair across the room.

'Bizarre, but plausible,' he admitted. 'Chromsky starts keeping a log.'

'Which is identical in content to Shaw's. Or pretty much so. He even becomes right-handed, which is not something that one does lightly or easily.'

'And they both died on the lower deck from a blow to the head.'

Benny nodded. 'Though we don't know how Shaw came by it, exactly. Could have been a fight.' Her head was throbbing again. 'And that just leaves two major questions outstanding.'

'Why aren't we affected, like the others seem to be?'

'Right.'

'And the other question?'

'Given that events seem to be repeating themselves as well – the fire in the galley, Chromsky's death – what happens next?'

Stuart's eyes narrowed. 'How do you mean?'

'Well, I don't mean to sound alarmist,' Benny said quietly, 'but the maiden voyage of *Medusa* ended with everyone on board dead.'

'Ah.'



She stood up. 'It's just a thought,' she said.

The bodies had not been moved. Since none of the recording equipment was working, Benny had suggested early on that they leave things as undisturbed as possible. They could record everything later, after the shuttle returned or back on Dellah. On old-fashioned videotape or even on film if necessary.

Andrea Moritz was not sure why she had come here. She had kept away from the area since they had first arrived. The dead were still there, sleeping in silence, shrouded in cobwebs and dust. And the woman was there, the one that Andrea often saw. The one who did her hair the same way, used similar make-up. The ghost. A kindred spirit. Andrea did not know who the woman was, but then she was not at all certain who she was herself any more.

Bettyana. She was Bettyana. But was that the apparition or herself?

Andrea stood in the centre of the open area, looking round at the husk-remains of the previous crew and passengers. There was something here, some purpose to her visit to this mausoleum.

She caught sight of the knife out of the corner of her eye. It slashed down towards her, the flickering light glinting on the polished blade. She gasped out loud as it sliced into her chest, tearing, ripping through. There was a sound like an explosion in her head, mingling with the sudden pain. And then, warmth, comfort, the closeness of an embrace. Silence.

Something dropped to the floor. She heard it bounce heavily on the carpet, heard it roll away under a chair. Then as suddenly as it had appeared, the vision was gone, and she was alone again with the dead. She breathed heavily for a while, the thump of the heavy object replaying in her ears. She looked round, trying to guess where it might have fallen. And somehow, she knew.

She knelt down, reached under the nearest armchair. She pushed her hand deep underneath, clawing, groping with her

fingers until they grazed against something hard, metallic. She grasped it, pulled it out into the half-light, held it up.

It was smaller than she had thought, had remembered. And heavier. The butt of the handgun fitted neatly into the palm of her hand, nestled warmly in place as if it had been made for her. She raised the gun slowly, bringing her left hand up to steady the weight, sighting along the short length of the barrel.

She was in the corridor outside. The woman was running in slow motion like a dream. As she ran, the woman turned and looked back, the horror etched on to her face, her mouth open as she shouted. Or screamed. She had long dark hair and narrow features. Her eyes were wide and blue. Despite the physical differences - the hair colour, the tilt of the mouth - the woman reminded Andrea of Helena Gyles. And in that moment, she realized that she hated the woman. She hated Helena's ice-cold demeanour, she hated her acceptance of responsibility, and most of all she hated her apparent indifference to Forsyth Kerven.

The pistol bucked in Andrea's hand, snapping upward against her tight grip. The sound of the report was a long, drawn-out echo that ricocheted along the corridor.

The woman kept running. But her head was suddenly tilted back, her chest thrust forward as the bullet slammed into the middle of her back. Then she pitched forward, sliding face down along the floor. The echoes of the shot died away, were superseded by the cadence of the woman's dying scream.

Andrea turned the gun over in her hand, examining the tarnished metal. She could clean it up. It would be interesting to examine the mechanism. Probably she could get it working. These old percussion weapons were surprisingly robust. She put the pistol in her jacket pocket, pleased to find that it fitted there as snugly as it had in her palm.

On her way back to her cabin, she stepped automatically over the body of Martia Lupis, face down in the corridor where she had fallen twenty years ago.

They went to Benny's cabin. There was something she wanted to check.

'I keep a diary,' she confessed to Stuart. He did not seem surprised, and made no comment. 'It's a way of keeping sane. And of coming to terms with the past. '

'Do you need to?'

'I think we all do at the moment. ' She opened her diary, riffling quickly through the pages. 'I started after my mother died. I guess I needed to work some things through, get them out of my system.'

He watched her turning the pages. 'What's with the yellow sticky labels?'

'Notes. Amendments. Corrections.'

'Embellishments?'

'If you say so.' She didn't like where this was leading. 'What do you reckon?' she asked him. 'Don't read it, just look at the writing.'

Stuart turned the pages slowly. Not so slowly she could tell him off, but he was reading it, damn him. Bits of it, at least. 'I noticed last night,' Benny said, as much to spoil his concentration as anything, 'that my phraseology has changed. There are odd words, ways I put things that don't seem right when I read back through.'

'What sort of not right?'

'They don't seem - well, they just don't seem like me.' She took the diary back from him. 'There's a reference here somewhere to some guy I never even heard of before.' She pointed.

Stuart ran his finger down the page, brushing against Benny's. "'Signing off now",' he read out quietly. 'That was what you thought was on one of the burnt pages.'

She nodded. 'I think my handwriting is changing too. Not as pronounced as Chromsky's, but a change.'

Stuart nodded. 'I noticed. It gets more ornate towards the end.' He grinned suddenly. 'Neater.'

'Thanks.'

Stuart tapped his chin with his forefinger, thinking. Then he pointed at Benny, snapping his fingers. 'Chromsky called you Anni. '

Benny nodded. 'A few of them are calling me Anni. Anni Goranson.' She thought for a moment. 'She ended up in a coffin.'

Stuart raised an eyebrow. 'True.'

They were silent for a while.

'It would be useful to know more about the original mission,' Stuart said at last.

'Yes.' Benny hunted round for her holdall, rummaging through the contents. 'Yes it would.' Where was it? 'Here we are.' She pulled out the datadisc that Braxiatel had given her before she left Dellah.

'What is it?'

'It's a collection of all the data that's still around concerning *Medusa's* original voyage. Or so I'm told. Crew and passenger details, news reports from the time, the lot.'

'And is there any particular reason why you haven't thought to look at it before?'

Benny raised her eyes to the ceiling. 'Yes there is actually, smartypants. None of the technology we brought with us is working, as you may have noticed.' She held up the cartridge, pushing her thumb firmly into the embossed switch on the side. And the small box started to hum. A beam of light darted out from the end, focusing itself on the wall and resolving into an image of the *Medusa* hanging in space. A caption gave the name of the ship and the date the image was captured.

'Bugger,' said Benny. 'Bugger, bugger, bugger.'

'I thought that was a technical term.'

'It is. It means ...*bugger*.'

'You haven't even tried it before, have you?'

Benny stared at him. 'Look, I've had a busy schedule here. Headaches, ghosts, the lot. And nothing else worked, why should this?' She frowned. 'Why is that?'

'Luck?'

‘No.’ Her mind was racing. For once her head was relatively clear of the throbbing ache. ‘Someone sabotaged the communications equipment, and all the other technology. Someone has their own plans for us.’

‘Who?’ Stuart asked. ‘What plans?’

‘I don’t know. ‘ Benny placed the datadisc on her dressing table and gestured for Stuart to sit beside her on the bed. ‘But at least now we have a chance of finding out. ‘ The cartridge had a built-in voice-controlled query system. All Benny had to do was to ask the right questions and hope it had the right data to provide a useful answer. ‘Right,’ she said to Stuart, ‘let’s find out about *Medusa*’s maiden voyage. Enjoy the show.’

**PART TWO**

**DISCOVERY**

## CHAPTER 7

The dance was held to mark the completion of the ship - her structure rather than her decor. Only the ballroom was finished. The rest of the interior was an empty, echoing hulk. The bar was stocked, the dance floor polished, and there were sufficient glasses for each of the guests to drink more than enough of everything.

Everyone who was anyone was there. But in those last days of the war, that was relatively few. Those who had attached themselves to Dellah as a safe haven were now beginning to leave - joining the last vestiges of the war they had escaped in order to prove how brave and true they really had been. Fewer than fifty people attended the inauguration of *Medusa* - some thirty were dignitaries and the three crew and four passengers for *Medusa's* maiden voyage, and eighteen were members of the *Medusa* research team.

For some of the team it was the first opportunity to get out and have fun since they had started working on the *Medusa* project several years before. They made the most of it. Even the project director, the normally calm and cool Taffeta Graize, behaved with some of the exuberance and energy one might expect of a dynamic and brilliant young genius whose talents have been realized. The others, as ever, took their lead from her. The chance to get out for a meal and some good old-fashioned entertainment was not to be spoilt merely by the presence of the local stuffed shirts and fogies. After several years of living out of late-night self-heating pizza cartons, the dance was a melee of energy and emotion.

And less than a week later, sixteen of those eighteen researchers who whirled across the dance floor joking and laughing were dead.

Taffeta Graize, the talented young director of the research team escaped the slaughter by the merest chance, Dellah's

news media reported. A last-minute decision to attend a dinner given by friends had meant she was not in the Advanced Research Department that night. Whatever happened in her absence left the rest of her team dead, cut down in their main laboratory by blaster fire.

All except Jackson Hart, who somehow, miraculously, escaped the carnage. And within a day he was charged with the biggest mass murder in Dellah's short and uneventful history.

The trial was as close to a media circus as St Oscar's had ever seen. Pictures were relayed live from the trial room in the Advanced Research Department across the video net. Practically the whole of the community watched Jackson Hart's impassive face day after day in preference to the increasingly encouraging news from the front of a war in which they were lucky to be counted as neutral. Day after day they listened to the evidence unfold, heard their preformed judgment confirmed, watched the handsome, stoic features of a mass murderer.

The fact that Hart had insisted on handling his own flimsy defence was an intriguing addition to the mystique of the quiet, handsome, intelligent man who everyone knew had murdered sixteen of his colleagues in cold blood and for no apparent reason. Throughout much of the trial, Taffeta Graize sat in the front row of the small group of observers, her tear-stained face staring straight at Hart.

Interspersed with the reports of the trial were snippets about *Medusa* herself. The ship was practically complete now, positioned on a temporary launch platform within the Advanced Research Department itself from where she would soon blast off on her maiden voyage. The design work, the research, was done. That was part of the irony, part of the intrigue - that her research team had been cut down after their work was in effect completed. But before they could observe the results of that work. Taffeta Graize and her new, hastily assembled team of understudies worked long and hard to pick up the threads, tie up the loose ends, and see the project completed to its original schedule. The fact that



the research project itself was one that a layman could understand - remote control of a ship over vast distances - was an added bonus.

The real icing on the media cake was that *Medusa* was designed to hark back to the halcyon days of spatial cruise liners. This proved to be an excuse to mine the vaults of St Oscar's history department, to trot out professors from that same department who looked and spoke as if they had lived through those times (whatever might have happened to them since), and a field day for the fashion and interior-design correspondents whose work was usually sadly neglected in favour of what was described as *real* news. The pictures of *Medusa's* interior as it took shape, and the reports of what the crew and passengers would be wearing during their experimental ordeal, boosted the air of romance that it would normally take an event with the same sort of enormity as sudden and unexpected death to generate. Hart's place in the popular histories as a handsome gentleman murderer was assured, and the fact that this claim to fame just happened to leave sixteen very bloody corpses in its wake was generally glossed over.

A further irony, too neat to have been orchestrated, was that the jury retired to consider its verdict the day before *Medusa* was due to launch. Nobody expected their deliberations to take very long, and they didn't. So it was that Jackson Hart stood in a small makeshift courtroom faced only by court officials, judge, jury and mass video audience to hear his fate at the same moment as the final preparations were being made to launch *Medusa* later that evening.

\* \* \*

Hart had been a model prisoner during his incarceration. He had been well behaved and quick with his pleases and thank-yous. To a security team who were used to locking up drunken students until they sobered up, this was a huge relief. The consequence, of course, was that they found it easiest to treat Hart as an errant student, and began to forget that he might actually be a dangerous criminal.

As he faced his accusers and his jury, then, Hart was flanked by two security guards. They both carried holstered side arms - old percussion pistols, since there was a war on and hi-tech weaponry was hard and expensive to come by. Hart's handcuffs had been removed as he entered the courtroom. Quite apart from his contrition and placid nature, the room being used was inside the main building of the Advanced Research Department, and that meant it was inside the security wall. Should Hart manage to escape from the court, he would not be going very far.

But of course, throughout the whole of the trial there was no trouble. The most violent Hart had ever become was a louder-than-usual response to an ill-considered question from the prosecuting council. As he stood straight and still, showing no emotion at the imminent verdict, nobody expected any trouble.

The judge, who had actually retired from Epsilon Serbiter a decade previously in order to lend his expertise to St Oscar's legal department and escape from the war, asked the foreman of the jury to rise. The jury of twelve good beings and true was composed of seven humanoids, two Golls, two creatures that had names even the vid-commentators struggled with, and - owing to an obscure bug in the computerized selection program - Gewdan Roth, the head of Social Studies. Roth's knowledge of group interaction had failed to help him to escape being elected foreman of the jury, and he got unsteadily to his feet.

'Have you reached a verdict?' the judge asked.

We have,' Roth replied, his voice cracking slightly under the studio lights.

'And is it the verdict of you all?'

'Yes. Er, well,' Roth struggled, 'that is, we think it is. Sir.'

The judge rubbed one eye with a forefinger. 'Think?'

'Yes, sir. You see, er, that one.' He pointed to one of the unpronounceable creatures. It waved a tentacle back at him. 'That one speaks a language that the translator could not process.'

‘So you don’t know what his verdict is?’ The judge’s voice was grim. ‘Is that what you’re saying.’

‘Well, er, partly. Yes.’ Roth looked round at his fellow jurors for support. Most of them were looking at their feet. Or what served as feet. ‘Actually, we’re not sure that he understood much of the proceedings at all.’

The judge stared at Roth.

Roth shuffled uncomfortably, and went on: ‘As far as we can tell by sign language and the like, he thinks this is some sort of media show. He keeps trying to name ten audio-trax he’d like shipped with him to a deserted asteroid.’ Roth swallowed. ‘Or something.’

The judge wiped his brow with a cloth that had previously been wrapped round the neck of his carafe of water. ‘Let’s call it a unanimous verdict, shall we?’ he said at length. ‘And what is the verdict?’

Roth’s relief was as evident as it was unfortunate. For days, the newscasts carried the unforgettable image of his broad smile (and for years undergraduates pasted printouts of it on his office door) as he carefully and clearly said, ‘Guilty as charged.’

The polite silence that followed was broken only by the sound of Roth and Hart both sitting down - one with relief, the other resignation. Hart leant forward, his head resting on the top rail of the dock, the rest of him out of sight behind the panelling. Instinctively, both security guards leant down as well to check he was all right.

‘Does the accused have anything to say before I pass sentence?’ the judge asked.

Hart did not look up, and his voice was slightly muffled.

‘You’d be lucky if you could pass water,’ he said.

The judge sat suddenly upright. ‘I beg your pardon.’

‘You heard.’ Hart straightened up. His eyes were dark with menace as he got to his feet. Beside him the security guards exchanged worried glances and felt for their side arms. They were still fumbling with their empty holsters when Jackson Hart stepped back and rammed their heads together. Their

guns were already tucked into the waistband of his trousers, and he drew them both and pointed them at the judge.

'I think this charade has gone on for long enough, don't you?' he said, his voice regaining some of the cavalier charm for which he was now renowned. Then he shot out the lights, dived over the top of the dock and flung himself out of the window.

The evening was drawing in as Hart exploded out of the ground-floor window amid a shower of flying glass. He hit the ground with his lowered shoulder, and rolled three times before he got his legs underneath him. Then he was up and running, zigzagging his way towards the nearest cover in case one of the guards had a second weapon or had already summoned assistance.

It was, he reflected, perhaps the best time of day for an escape attempt. The half-light would hamper any pursuers just as it would degrade the quality of data from video monitoring systems that were caught on the cusp of relying on daylight and switching to infrared imaging. This was a stroke of luck, although most of Hart's actions were meticulously, coldly, planned. His actual moment of escape - the point in the proceedings at which he had left them - was finely calculated. He had felt duty-bound to hear the verdict, just in case by some chance they failed to find him guilty. But by escaping before sentence had officially been passed, he hoped to buy himself some leeway in the subsequent and inevitable pursuit. Had a sentence - a death sentence, for sure - been passed, the security forces would have had no compunction about trying to kill him rather than prevent his escape. As it was, they might still feel no remorse at such a course, but equally they might hesitate, might give him an extra edge that he desperately needed.

Hart's chances of escape were less than slim, and he knew it. And he had decided that outrageous daring was his only approach. He had, after all, nothing to lose.

As he made his careful way round the low, drab buildings of the Advanced Research Department, Hart reflected that his

fate ultimately rested with the intelligence and deductive abilities of the security chief. His best hope was that they did not realize – or did not believe – that Hart knew he could never escape through the wall that surrounded the Advanced Research Department. He had spent most of the trial thinking through the possibilities, and while he had indeed hit upon an ingenious plan that would get him through the wall, it depended on nobody realizing that he was going to try. But fate and timing had played into his hands and offered him another, even more audacious, escape route. Just so long as the ARD security chief did not anticipate his actions.

Jarl Kedrick had not been ARD's security chief for very long. But he had taken it almost personally when there had been not just one but sixteen grotesque murders within his facility, and accepted in an equally personal manner the congratulations for tracking down and apprehending the killer. He was short, fat, and almost devoid of charisma. But he was in charge, and his men knew him to be fair, shrewd, and impulsive.

He was also somewhat short-tempered, despite his avuncular appearance, as the two guards who had allowed Hart to relieve them of their weapons and escape were reminded in graphic detail in front of a group of their colleagues. That dealt with, Kedrick deployed his men to key points on the wall – anywhere there was a possibility of climbing it or tunnelling underneath. The main gates were heavily reinforced.

Next, Kedrick was tempted simply to wait. Hart would surface sooner rather than later. He could not enter any of the buildings without a security card, and his own had been taken away. If he used someone else's they would have either a report of a stolen card, or a body that would not lie undetected in the open for long. If Hart tried to enter a building without a card, they would have him; if he stole a card, they would have him; if he tried to escape through the wall, they would have him.

But patience was not Kedrick's strong suit any more than he was willing to be seen not to be doing anything. His best course of action, he decided, was to take some of his men from the wall and use them to start a sector-by-sector search of the ARD in the hope of forcing Hart to break cover. How many men he could withdraw he was not certain. So he made his way to the main gate to determine on the spot how many officers were required to guard it adequately.

When he got there, he found that the dozen men that he had assumed would be more than sufficient were barely able to cope with the job of checking everyone by sight as well as authenticating their passes, whether they were coming in or going out. He had not ruled out the possibility of Hart having an accomplice who might come in to help him, and this was intended to deter such action.

But rather than the occasional visitor to the ARD, or the slow trickle of researchers and sponsors leaving at the end of the day, there was a queue to get in that stretched out of sight.

'What's going on?' Kedrick demanded of the senior officer.

'It's a nightmare, sir. Most of these people have temporary passes that aren't on the main system so we can't directly verify them. There are a good number who come in, get bored and want to go out again for a bit, which doesn't help. We have to DNA check them, which takes forever. Then there's all the equipment.'

'Equipment?' Kedrick had to shout to make himself heard above the angry complaints of the people who had been kept waiting for the past hour.

'Vidcast stuff for the media people. And most of the others have brought their own recording gear. Out to capture a bit of history.'

Kedrick stared at the crowd, then back at the security officer. His mind had been totally focused on Hart, on how to seal off the ARD and ensure his recapture. The obvious, almost routine after the weeks of preparation, had eluded him. 'Of course,' he breathed. 'It's tonight. The launch.' Tonight was the one night that practically anyone at St

Oscar's - on Dellah even - could apply for a temporary pass to get into the ARD. Tonight was when *Medusa* would roar upward into the heavens watched by eager crowds swelled by the publicity of the trial of the man he was even now hunting.

'Don't worry, sir,' the officer was shouting to Kedrick. 'It's taking a while, but he can't get out of here.'

Kedrick was looking back into the Research Department, across the low buildings towards the huge irregular bulk standing silhouetted next to a tall, thin gantry that spindled upwards into the darkening sky. A subdued but steady stream of smoke wafted up from *Medusa's* massive idling engines as she prepared for the launch. 'Oh yes he can,' Kedrick said. Then he swore.

Launch Control was a sea of activity. Technicians and operators were dashing between consoles, shouting instructions to each other, checking readings, adjusting settings on the equipment. A large screen at one end of the room showed the stark bulk of *Medusa*, sharply outlined against the last dying light of the evening.

In the centre of the room, still and alert, recently returned from the trial, sat Taffeta Graize. Her white-blonde hair was gently ruffled by the rush of activity around her, but her cat-green eyes were focused on the image on the screen. Nothing else seemed to get her attention.

'Are we go?' a technician shouted from behind her shoulder. 'Do we have a go condition yet?'

The noise died down a little, and one by one the chief technicians called in the status of their sections: 'Go.' Most augmented the call with a smiling thumbs-up.

'Structural integrity?' the technician shouted across the room. 'We're waiting for your status. We have go on all other systems.'

The operator in question held up his hand for pause. He continued to check a reading on his console, forefinger pressed lightly to his earpiece as reports were called in from observers at the launch site. 'One moment, please.'

There was silence in the room, waiting, expectation. Taffeta Graize turned slightly in her chair, shifting her attention for the first time from *Medusa* to the structural-integrity operator.

After a short while, the operator smiled. 'Sorry, we had a bad reading. It's cleared now.'

'What sort of bad reading?' Graize's voice carried across the room despite its soft edge.

'Oh, er, a hull breach. One of the emergency airlock chute covers was signalling it was open. But the reading has cleared now, and a visual check shows it's sealed.' He shrugged. 'We have a go condition.'

A pause. Then Taffeta Graize nodded, and turned her attention back to the screen. Her voice was barely more than a husky whisper: 'Begin the final launch sequence.' A subdued cheer rang out around her.

The countdown started at 20. The numbers counted down on the screen, flashed translucently across *Medusa's* smoking hulk. By 15 the entire team was shouting out in unison. The only exceptions were Graize herself, sitting serene and smiling as she watched, and the chief technician calling out the status in the pauses between the numbers.

'14.'

'Final confirmation on all systems.'

'13.'

'Ignition sequence keyed.'

'12.'

'And activated.'

'11.'

'Crew - ten to launch.'

'10.'

'Tower retracting.'

On the screen the tall skeletal structure of the tower swung slowly aside. Steam erupted from the end of the walkway as it broke away from *Medusa's* main hatch.

'9.'

'Green on all systems.'

At the back of the room, the door slammed open.



‘8.’

Kedrick entered at a run, two security officers close behind him. ‘Any problems?’ he shouted over the shout of the technicians.

‘7’

‘Any chance someone has sneaked on board?’

‘6’

We did register a hull breach.’

‘5.’

‘But it was a false alarm.’

‘4’

‘Final commit now. Launch initiated.’

‘3’

‘Stop the launch.’

‘2.’

‘We can’t.’

‘1’

‘Abort!’

‘0.’

The room erupted. Everyone was on their feet, jumping, cheering, shouting, embracing. Everyone except Kedrick and Graize. Their eyes locked. She frowned slightly as Kedrick bit back his anger.

On the screen the huge bulk of *Medusa* rose slowly, tentatively, on a cushion of smoke and flame. It gathered momentum as it lifted, accelerating gradually as the smoke billowed out and the engines roared in triumph. In a few moments it was screaming its way into the sky leaving a fiery trail that split the darkness in its wake.

‘What is it?’ Graize asked Kedrick as the noise died down. ‘You say you had a hull breach.’

‘A false reading.’ A slight smile played across her face.

‘I hope so.’ Kedrick turned to face the screen. *Medusa* was a dwindling point of flame receding into the firmament. ‘Because if not, Jackson Hart may be up there. On *Medusa*.’

Graize turned back to the screen, the smile wiped away. ‘Then God help them,’ she said quietly. ‘God help us all.’

## CHAPTER 8

Benny reached out and switched off the datadisc. The image on the wall flickered once, then was gone. But the image of Jackson Hart lingered in Benny's mind's eye. She had recognized him at once, though she had not known his name when they had first met. Jackson Hart was the ghost she had danced with in the ballroom.

'And a few days later, they lost all contact with *Medusa*,' Stuart said, breaking into Benny's thoughts. 'Until now. Want to guess what happened?'

Benny lay back on the bed and looked up at the ceiling. A tiny spider made its way across the embossed plasterwork drawing a thin thread behind it. 'I'll tell you something,' she said as she rubbed at her temples, 'if Jackson Hart did manage to steal on board -'

'If? They never found him. Where else could he have gone?'

'OK, so he was definitely on board. And now, the numbers match.' Benny sat up again. Her head was a dull throbbing ache as if her brain were too big for her skull. 'Seven of them - three crew and four passengers - plus Hart.'

Stuart breathed out heavily. 'And eight of us.'

'And we do seem to be taking on the roles of the original crew.' She got up and stretched. 'Or rather, everyone else does.'

'Maybe we're too close to it. Maybe we just haven't noticed it ourselves. There's your diary - your phrases and handwriting altering.'

'Yes.' Benny picked up her diary from where it lay on the dressing table. 'Yes, there's that.' She hugged the book to her chest, comforted slightly by its warm pressure. Then as suddenly as the thought struck her, she dropped it back on to the table. 'Anni Goranson,' she said. 'In the casket, remember.'

Stuart grimaced. 'I remember.'

Benny was already at the door. 'She was holding a book. Come on.'

The smell when they opened the casket was as unpleasant as Benny remembered. It was a sickly, almost sweet aroma that clawed at the back of the nostrils and lined the throat. It was worse in many ways than the sight of the body. Benny had been expecting that to shock, had braced herself for it. Benny reached inside the battered casket, pulled the notebook away from Anni's brittle clutch, tried not to hear the snap of a finger as the book came free. She stepped back, holding the notebook gingerly by her fingertips as Stuart closed the lid of the casket.

The images she held of her previous sight of Anni Goranson's corpse were not as extreme as the reality, but they could be cut off, discarded, when the lid slammed shut again. The smell lingered in the air, in the mouth, on the clothes. Benny followed Stuart out into the medical centre reception area, and they slumped down into a low couch. Benny took a deep breath, and opened the book.

It was indeed a diary. The handwriting was a flowing, elegant curl that she recognized from the additional pages of logbook they had found half burnt in Kallis Shaw's cabin. Benny turned the pages, skimming the text without reading it, picking out odd words and phrases that stood out. Names were more apparent in the flow of the text, given prominence by their initial capital letters. She saw mentions of the crew and passengers of *Medusa*. There was a brief description of Taffeta Graize.

There was a reminiscence about an old love affair, somewhat one-sided. A name from this sprang up from the page – Jeffry Anders. And each section, each entry, ended with the same phrase. A habit, a tiny piece of the character of Anni Goranson that survived the grave: 'Signing off now.'

The pages smeared as Benny's eyes filled with moisture. After a while she stopped turning the pages, and just stared down at them. Seeing nothing. Feeling nothing.

Stuart lifted the book gently from her. 'Let's see how it ends,' he said softly. 'Let's see if Anni left us anything we don't already know.' He turned to the last entry, and they read through it together.

I met Playdon in the corridor. I was on my way to the main lounge, he was on his way from it. He stopped me, took me by the shoulder and pulled me aside as if someone might overhear. There was nobody else in sight.

'I wonder if you'd have a word with Betton,' he said. His tone suggested, as always, that he was telling me, not asking me.

'You mean Miles,' I said.

'Don't presume to tell me what I mean,' he said. Then he seemed to remember he was asking me a favour, and he tried to smile it away. 'Tell him to leave Bettyana alone. He's only annoying her, I'm sure, and she doesn't want his sort paying her too much attention, now does she?'

'Doesn't she?' I asked. 'Then why can't she tell him herself?' I didn't wait for a reply. I just walked on. I remember the conversation so clearly. I have written it out exactly, as it seemed we were at cross-purposes throughout. And now I have written it, it still seems odd, although I cannot tell why.

'You know what you are, Goranson? What Martia says you are?' he called down the corridor after me.

'You mean Lupis,' I called back.

'You're a troublemaker, that's what you are. It could well be your fault we're in this situation, you know that?'

It was news to me. And I couldn't think why Martia Lupis might have taken a dislike to me. So I ignored him and kept going.

When I reached the lounge, Rathbone Quarrel was there having a drink. As usual. I could hear him speaking, arguing, as I approached. Then, abruptly the conversation stopped. Martia Lupis was handing him a glass as I went in. She saw me, I think, out of the corner of her eye, and stepped back - away from Quarrel - as if she had been bitten. Her look was a mixture of surprise, contempt and anxiety.

And in that moment, I knew. I realized what I should have noticed much earlier. So much for my skills in observation and human nature. I tried to keep my expression blank. I sat apart from them and asked Martia for a drink. Suddenly I needed it. She glared at me. Then she turned to Quarrel, caught his eye. After a moment, he gave the smallest nod, then looked abruptly away. Martia headed off towards the galley for more wine. She knew that I knew - I think she thought I had known for a while. And she was worried about who I might tell. Poor cold, aloof, efficient Martia. Out of control for once. How she must have hated and resented that. I wanted to tell her it was OK, that her secret was safe. But somehow I knew she wouldn't believe me, couldn't take the risk. I guess it was Bettyana she was really scared of.

'Shaw's dead,' Rathbone Quarrel said once Martia was out of the room.

'My God,' I said. 'Where?' I thought from the sudden ness of his comment he had caught sight of the body falling into view from some place of concealment.

He cocked his head slightly on one side in that way he has. His moustache twitched. 'Don't you mean "how?" ' he asked. His voice was tinged with menace.

I gulped. 'Isn't that what I said?'

'It's not what I heard.'

Martia was back. She held out a silver salver, my glass of red wine catching the light as it moved towards me so that it seemed to glow from within. I smiled at her, but she remained expressionless. I took the glass and stood up. Then I raised it to them both in a mock toast, though I did not drink.

As I left the room, I heard Quarrel's hiss from behind me: 'Will she drink it?'

It struck me as an odd thing to say. Why ask for wine if not to drink it? Yet it sits untouched beside me as I write this. I shall take it to Shaw's cabin. I have watched him write his log, know where he keeps the key to the drawer from his furtive glances at the leg of the desk when I have asked him what he records and why. Before he changed, before he

became so authoritative, I had hoped we might talk as diarists, as recorders of the truth as we see and experience and remember it.

If he is not here to write the log of our voyage, then someone else must assume the mantle. I think I am as well qualified as anyone.

Signing off now.

Benny and Stuart both looked up from the text at the same moment. 'That's when she signed off for good,' Stuart said.

'Not quite. She did write one entry at least in Shaw's log.' Benny's head was splitting. 'I think I need to lie down for a bit.' She rubbed at her temples with her fingers. 'I wish I knew why I was getting these awful heads.'

Stuart put his hand on her shoulder, squeezed gently. 'You get some rest,' he said. 'I'll read this through properly and see if there's anything useful to be found in it.'

'OK.' Benny pulled herself to her feet. 'Come and get me if you find anything.' She left him sitting at the medical centre reception desk, Anni Goranson's diary open in front of him. His head was in his hands, as if he were concentrating deeply on the words.

Andrea Moritz looked back from the doorway. Her eyes were as wide as her smile. She looked directly at Forsyth Kerven, her meaning obvious as she ran her hand down the door frame, gently caressing the polished wood. Then she turned, her gaze lingering slightly longer than the rest of her body, the sway of her hips exaggerated as she left the room.

Rawling Hoyt watched her in fascination. He was still staring at the empty doorway when Dorian Phelps laid a hand on his shoulder and said, 'I wonder if I might have a word with you. In private.' He did not wait for an answer, but strode out of the room without a backward glance.

Hoyt hesitated a moment, then followed. Behind him, Forsyth Kerven and Helena Gyles were alone in the room.

Helena waited until Hoyt was well out of earshot. 'That woman sickens me,' she hissed. 'I don't know why you put up with it.'

'Partly,' Kerven said calmly, 'because she frightens me. You've seen that temper of hers. Wouldn't do to upset her. Especially not in a confined space. Might not get out alive.'

'Follow her to her cabin, and you wouldn't get out alive,' Helena replied.

'Probably true.'

'What about Benny?' The question was a whisper as Helena leant towards Kerven. 'She knows. I'm sure she knows.'

'We could talk to her. You could.'

'And admit we're worried? That she has a hold over us? You're joking.'

'What else can we do?'

'There are some sleeping tablets in the galley. They're quite strong.'

Kerven gaped. 'What are you suggesting?' he hissed.

'They shouldn't be mixed,' Helena said, 'with alcohol.'

Kerven was shaking his head in astonishment. 'You can't be serious. Martia, you can't be serious. But she wouldn't... Not Anni... '

The corridor slipped from the flickering half-light that Benny was now so used to into well-lit brilliance. The dust faded and the cobwebs receded. The hallucination, if that was what it was, lasted just a few seconds, then the lights guttered and dimmed again. She leant against the panelled wall for a while, wondering if it was the incessant flickering of the light that was causing her headaches. But if so, why was nobody else affected?

She caught her breath, blinked away some of the pain, and started tentatively along the corridor again. As she rounded a bend, Benny almost cannoned into Dorian Phelps coming the other way. He was mumbling under his breath and obviously annoyed. He made no attempt to stand aside to let Benny pass, so instead she waited for him.

But Phelps stopped, put his hand on Benny's shoulder and drew her into a doorway. He looked around as he did so, back where he had come, and ahead round the bend where Benny had been. But the corridor in both directions was empty.

His voice was nasal and slightly squeaky as he tried to keep it quiet. 'I wonder if you'd have a word with Betton,' he said. It was not a question.

'You mean Hoyt,' Benny said.

'Don't presume to tell me what I mean.' His attempt at conspiracy was destroyed by his sudden shout, which echoed down the corridor. Then he seemed to remember he was asking a favour, took a deep breath, and smiled thinly. 'Tell him to leave Bettyana alone. He's only annoying her, I'm sure, and she doesn't want his sort paying her too much attention, now does she?'

'Doesn't she?' Benny asked. 'If you mean Andrea, then I have to tell you I think she loves it. In fact I think she'd rather more people paid her the same sort of attention. Anyway,' she went on, 'she's a grown woman, as Rawling Hoyt has obviously noticed, so why can't she tell him herself?'

Benny did not wait for Phelps's reply. She pushed past him, and continued down the corridor. She was getting a bad feeling about this conversation. More than ever now she needed a drink. She needed a clear head. She needed to think.

Phelps's voice stopped her in her tracks. 'You know what you are, Goranson? What Martia says you are?' he shouted after her.

Benny did not turn back. 'You mean Helena,' she said. And as soon as she had said it, she knew what his reply would be.

'You're a troublemaker, that's what you are. It could well be your fault we're in this situation, you know that?'

'Yeah,' said Benny. 'Right.' And she carried on towards the officers' mess.

The sounds of an argument reached Benny as she turned into the corridor where the mess was situated. She could



hear Forsyth Kerven's voice, though she could not make out what he was saying. She went to some effort to make a noise as she approached the doorway, scuffing her feet and coughing loudly. But even so, it was not until she stood balanced on the threshold that the conversation abruptly stopped. Helena was handing Kerven a cut-glass tumbler. His hand was frozen round hers as they both looked towards the door. Then Helena pulled away sharply, almost spilling the drink. Her look of surprise was mingled with worry. There was also an edge of contempt to it.

And in that moment, Benny realized what she should have known from the first day on *Medusa*. In her mind's eye she saw Kerven and Helena standing apart, hardly speaking any more, seeming to ignore each other. She remembered them leaving separately at the end of the day, but always one close on the other's heels. She heard the sobs coming from Helena's room, the cabin adjacent to Forsyth Kerven's.

Benny collapsed into the nearest chair, rubbing her head with both hands. 'God, I need a drink,' she said.

Helena was standing beside her. 'What,' she said huskily, 'would you like?'

Benny fought to concentrate. 'Wine,' she said at last. 'Just get me some wine.' She rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands, aware that Helena had not moved. When she looked up, Helena was looking across the room at Kerven. He gave a slight nod, then seemed to notice that Benny was watching, and he looked sharply away. The sound of Helena's heavy footsteps rang in Benny's head like a second heartbeat.

Benny closed her eyes and leant back in the chair. Poor Helena. Outwardly she was so cool, so controlled. And now she knew, or at least suspected, that her secret was out. Not that Benny was any threat to her, she must realize that. Probably she was worried what Andrea would do if she found out that Forsyth Kerven, whom she was pulling out all the stops - and everything else - to ensnare, was already captivated.

Kerven's voice cut across Benny's thoughts. 'Chromsky's dead,' he said.

Benny almost said, 'You mean Shaw.' But just in time she realized that it was she who was confused.

It was like a dream. At that moment, Benny heard the words of Anni Goranson's account of a conversation twenty years ago swim into her heard. 'My God,' she said. She tried to recall Anni Goranson's account of the conversation - how had it gone? She had to break the thread, to change things round somehow. Whatever happened, she must not get caught up in whatever events were being replayed here. She opened her eyes and turned to face Kerven. 'How?' she asked.

She thought she had succeeded. Kerven cocked his head slightly to one side. His moustache bristled slightly as he exhaled. Then he said, 'Don't you mean "how"?'

Benny stared at him. She almost laughed in surprise. 'That's what I said.'

'It's not what I heard.'

Benny snorted. 'That figures.'

Helena was back now, carrying a glass of blood-red wine on a small silver salver. She held it out to Benny without comment. The facets of the glass caught and reflected the flickering light as Benny reached out and took it. Helena's face was a blank mask, devoid of expression or emotion. Kerven, by contrast, leant slightly forward in his chair.

Benny got shakily to her feet. She was desperate to gulp down the wine, to get what relief she could from the alcohol, to clear her head. But she hesitated. There was something on the brink of her mind, the edge of thought. She frowned, tried to concentrate, but it was gone.

They were both still watching her closely. So she raised the glass in salute. 'Well,' she said, trying to think of a toast that could not be misinterpreted, that Helena would not take as a gibe or a knowing aside. She discarded 'Here's to you both' in the same thought as 'Absent friends' and 'All the best'.

'Bottoms up,' Benny said before she had adequately explored all the possibilities. Then she winced, coughed, and made for the door. From behind her, Kerven said something quietly to Helena, but Benny was too preoccupied with her headache to pay it any attention. She needed to spend some

time thinking, undisturbed. Her own cabin was not necessarily the best place. She could do without possible interruptions from Stuart, and if Helena came looking for her, she'd rather not be there.

Almost without conscious decision, Benny found herself outside Chromsky's cabin. She looked round, guiltily, ignored the slight movement down the end of the corridor as imagination or a trick of the flickering light, and went inside.

The key was beside the desk leg, tucked into the shadows as she expected. It turned easily in the lock, and Benny took the logbook from the drawer, pushing the drawer closed again but leaving the key in position. She placed the book carefully on the desk, opened it at the beginning and began to read.

Most of the entries were of little interest. They served merely to confirm her opinion of Chromsky as an arrogant control freak.

The logbook started with Chromsky's account of Taffeta Graize confirming to him that *Medusa* was returning and that she wanted him to lead the expedition. 'At last', he added. This was odd, as if he had been expecting this for some time. Certainly, from the account, it was not the first time he had been asked about *Medusa* - he was already expecting it. But from the date, it could only have been for a day at the most given the point at which *Medusa* had been identified.

Benny flicked forward several pages, scanning the text as she went and seeing little of interest. She turned another page, then turned back. Her brain had been lagging slightly behind her eyes. She reached for the glass of red wine, sipping the rich dark liquid as she read, feeling it moisten her dusty mouth and throat.

We have a substitute for Maryann Declleiter. She sounds an ideal replacement, though from what Graize says she may ask as many questions and prove as much of a pain as Declleiter was shaping up to be. Still, as the newcomer, Professor Summerfield may be more restrained in her scrutiny of this mission.

It was her own name that had stood out. Benny read through the paragraph several times. There was something here, again, that did not ring true. The entry was dated a couple of days before Maryann Decleiter's funeral - before she had ever met Taffeta Graize or been offered the job. But that was not all. Again, Chromsky's words suggested some longer-term planning than could be the case. How could Maryann Decleiter have been 'shaping up to be' a pain when there could at best have been a day between *Medusa* appearing on the scanners, and Maryann's death. And why, if the team was only just being assembled, did Chromsky talk in terms of replacing Maryann with a substitute rather than finding another archaeologist?

She paged through the rest of the book, hardly paying it attention, sipping at the wine as she tried to think. She was feeling slightly light-headed again. But this was not the constant ache that had been her companion for several days now: it was closer to the alcohol-induced haze that she would have expected from drinking a bottle rather than half a glass of wine.

By the time Benny reached the first blank page at the end of Chromsky's curtailed account, she was feeling decidedly woozy. She had come to no conclusion beyond the fact that it seemed from the logbook that Chromsky at least might have known of *Medusa's* imminent return for longer than anyone else. Furthermore, he - or Taffeta Graize, or someone - had been assembling a team for this mission from well before *Medusa's* return.

The room was out of focus. Only the pages of the logbook in front of her seemed to exhibit any clarity. Benny reached out for her wine. But instead her fingers touched something lying on the desk between the blotter and the glass. It rolled slightly at her touch, and she struggled to focus as she picked it up and held it in the flickering light. It was an old-fashioned fountain pen. Without thinking, Benny unscrewed the top. The nib seemed in good order, shining gold with a hint of blue-black ink on its tip.

Suddenly, Benny's course of action seemed obvious. There was a simple way to go over what she knew, over the events that had taken place, and try to get them clear in her head. Without conscious decision she pulled the logbook closer to her on the desk. She took a swig of the rich, viscous wine, and started to write. Her characters were flowing swirls of ink that formed in dark blue, drying to black as she wrote, paying half-conscious attention to every detail as she recorded it.

Why am I writing this? I suppose it's partly out of a sense of duty, a feeling that the logbook should be kept up to date, completed. I knew where he kept the key to the desk - hardly difficult to find. So here I am. Partly, I suppose, it makes a change from keeping my own diary. This log is - will be - an account of events that have occurred. Impartial, objective. Not the personal recollections and aspirations of a diary. Not the hopes and fears, the predictions and the retractions. The truth. Pure and simple. And frightening.

To begin where Heath Chromsky left off, then.

Chromsky had been spending more and more time alone in his cabin, emerging only to shout his orders and complain about the state of things. Cut off, without communications, he seems somehow to have lost his edge, his reason almost. As have we all, I suspect.

But the facts. Keep to the facts and events as they are and as they occurred.

*It was by chance that we found him. I don't know why, and it doesn't much matter, but we were on the lower decks. I could not sleep, and increasingly I find the company of the others irritating. Disturbing almost. They seem to resent my presence, somehow to blame me for what is happening here. So I read much of the evening, write my diary, and wander the endless empty corridors.*

Benny paused, took another sip of her wine. The words swam on the page in front of her, seeming to float above the paper. She was not sure that what she had just written was entirely accurate, that it was what had really happened, or

the way it had really happened. But the pen was moving seemingly of its own accord, and her hand followed where it led.

I heard, or thought I heard, shouting. Then the echoing sounds of movement, heavy and violent. The sound seemed to emanate from every one of the corridors, through the pipework and the machinery. By the time I had orientated myself, found the source among the echoes and the false trails, the sound had stopped. Cut off. Abrupt.

I found him slumped against the wall. There was a dark smear down the wall behind him, and his head had nodded forward so that I could see the mess of blood and shattered bone matted into his thinning hair.

*Perhaps he had fallen. Slipped, lost his balance, pitched off a gantry. Who knows?*

That was not right. She could not recall what had happened, but that was not right, she was sure. But as she finished the wine, Benny decided that what had really happened did not in fact matter. Better to record something. It could always be amended, updated later, as she knew from the way she wrote her diary.

*Vasco Playdon has some medical expertise, but even I could tell at once that he was beyond Playdon's help. I watched from the shadows, hid from them. I don't know why. They put him in a casket, in the medical centre. When the lid closed, shutting off the light that shone in on his pale features, the sound was like the snapping shut of his logbook. Closed for ever. And at that moment, I knew I had to write of his death, to close the book on Shaw's life.*

Again Benny halted. Vasco Playdon... Who was Vasco Playdon? And how did she know they had found the body and put it in a casket? Playdon had mentioned that Shaw was dead, true. No.

Not true. Not true at all. *Kerven* had mentioned that *Chromsky* was dead. Why was she so confused about the names. She reached for the wineglass, lifted it to her lips. But it was empty.

A tiny drop of red liquid welled up from the bottom of the glass as she tilted it and trickled like blood towards her mouth. It dripped on to her tongue like honey. The moment she felt it touch, Benny also felt herself slipping away. The room spun round as she tried desperately to focus again on the book. The pen moved in her hand, but it wrote in halting, slippery strokes as she slumped forward. The edge of the logbook caught the wineglass as she slumped forward, pushing the book across the desk. Benny's head connected with the blotter. The glass rolled across the desk and dropped to the floor, the stem breaking away from the bowl with a crack as it landed. A fine mist of dust erupted from the point of impact.

With a final effort, Benny pulled herself upright in the chair. She pulled the book towards her, dragged the desk drawer heavily open. The book flopped into the drawer and she pushed it shut with the weight of her body as she fell forward again. Her fingers gripped the key, turning it painfully slowly in the lock. The lock clicked into place and Benny withdrew the key from the lock. Her fingers were sweat-slippery, and the small key slipped away from her, bounced and rolled on the carpet, finding its way almost back to the position by the desk leg where it had been.

Benny heard rather than felt the key fall. Her head sank forward again. The thud of her forehead on the desk was the sound of the door opening behind her. For a second her vision was filled with the swirl of the woodgrain as it flowed past a dark knot in the wood. Then the knot expanded to fill her field of view as everything went dark.

‘Signing off now.’

Forsyth Kerven leant Benny's inert body gently back in the chair, and pulled the chair away from the desk. The fingers of Benny's left hand were curled into the loop of the handle of the desk drawer. As the chair moved away, her arm stretched out, then the fingers untwined themselves and her arm slumped to her side.

Kerven felt for her pulse, and nodded to Helena Gyles.

‘What was she doing?’ Helena asked.

‘I don’t know. Something in the drawer?’ He tried it. The drawer was locked. Kerven considered for a moment, then he gripped the handle tightly, and yanked it hard. The drawer burst open, wood splintering from the lock’s surround. The logbook lay open inside the drawer.

Helena glanced at the log. ‘Anni and her memories,’ she said with disdain. ‘God knows what lies she may have written about us in there.’ She held a notebook in her hand, and held it up as she spoke. ‘We’ve seen the lies and paranoid inventions she’s written in here.’

‘Let me see.’ Kerven took the book out of the drawer and started turning back the pages, looking for where Benny’s writing began.

‘Don’t waste your time.’ Helena reached across, took the pages he had turned into her hand and tore them from the book. She dropped them into the metal wastepaper bin beside the desk.

Kerven closed the logbook and dropped it back into the drawer. Then he pushed the drawer shut. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a silver lighter. The side was embossed with the Medusa’s-head symbol. His thumb flicked the lighter into life, a tiny orange flame erupting from its top. The flickering of the fire echoed the guttering wall lights, sent interference patterns rippling through the shadows, as he bent down and touched the flame to the edge of the torn pages.

‘What shall we do with her?’ he asked as he straightened up.

Helena was still holding the notebook she had brought with her. She reached over and tucked it under Benny’s hand so that it was held close to her body. Benny’s diary. ‘I have an idea,’ Helena said with a wide smile.

They carried Benny’s body between them, Helena taking her legs and leading the way while Kerven took the weight, holding Benny under the shoulders and following. The door to Chromsky’s cabin banged shut behind them as they headed towards the medical centre.



The fire burnt smokily, lazily. Tiny flecks of blackened paper detached themselves from the pages and floated upward with the hot air. Then the flames seemed to falter as if in a sudden breeze. They flickered and died, the smoke rising in a thin, undulating line as the edges of the burnt paper glowed for a while with tiny dots of hot yellow. Then they too faded away, leaving the middle parts of the pages of the log intact within the blackened halo where the fire had eaten them.

## CHAPTER 9

The blackness was so close-and stifling that it fitted Benny like a velvet blanket pulled over her head, over her whole body. Even in complete darkness there is a hint of light, a glimmer in the night that the eyes can latch on to and amplify, can turn to shapes and shadows in the darkness. But this was a blackness that was entire and complete.

Benny was lying down, her arms clasped over her chest, over a rectangular object that lay across her breasts. She tried to sit up, and her forehead immediately banged into an obstruction. Stars exploded inside her head, showering droplets of fiery pain through her brain. Then they died and were gone, and the darkness closed in again. She shifted her hands and her feet. And met obstructions again. She was beginning to panic now, the fear welling up in her dry throat, about to burst out in a scream.

Instead, she choked back the fear. She felt carefully above her, her fingers exploring the slightly curved ceiling of the confining space. At the same time her mind tried to retrace its steps of memory, tried to recall where she was and how she got here.

The wine.

She remembered the wine, and the logbook. And slumping forward in the chair at Chromsky's desk. She remembered how her writing, her words, had mirrored Anni Goranson's entry in Kallis Shaw's original log. She heard herself telling Stuart, 'She ended up in a coffin.' She recalled Anni Goranson's form, contorted with the pain and terrible fear of death, her diary hugged to her chest, her forehead bruised and her fingernails torn from their sockets with scratching at the lid of the casket.

And the terror struck Benny.

For a while it took control. She screamed, the sound echoing pathetically around the inside of the casket. She braced her knees against the lid and pushed, feeling the bone and cartilage compress to no avail. She scrabbled at the smooth interior, scraping and scratching with her fingers, trying to get a purchase where there was none, feeling the metal become slippery with the blood from her grazed fingertips and torn nails. And she felt the increasing difficulty of her rasping breath as she wasted the precious air in the sealed casket.

Benny tasted the blood as she jammed her finger into her mouth to stop the screaming, and bit deep into it. *Think*, she mentally shouted at herself. *Think, damn you.* She didn't have to break the casket open. All she had to do was make a tiny gap - big enough for the tiny molecules of air to seep in and keep her alive until she could think of a way of opening the lid. Or was rescued. Or starved to death. The blood was warm and salty in her mouth at the thought, and she tore her finger free of her clenched teeth.

There had to be a way, somehow, to break out, to survive, she told herself. But at the back of her mind, the realization was equally strong that Anni Goranson had found no way out. So far events had replayed themselves with unsettling accuracy. And her own death would soon be just another echo of the past haunting the present.

Well she wasn't going to go quietly or without a fight. Benny struggled and gasped for breath as she hammered on the inside of the casket. Then, without realizing it, she found she was tearing instead at her own throat as she fought for breath, felt the life rasping from her, saw the darkness turning from black night to red mist.

With her final conscious strength, she curled as tightly as the restricted space would allow into a foetal position, hugging her diary - her life - to her chest, feeling her body heave and convulse around it. *Why me?* she screamed silently into the night. *Why me? Why here? Why now?* The sound of her ragged breath was her whole world. *Why like this?* Then the world stopped.

Stuart Stonely had woken from a fitful sleep. He had dreamt – he always dreamt. Recently the dreams had been more coherent, less muddled. But even so, they were bordering on the nightmare.

He had pulled himself out of bed, checked the time, and decided to see how Benny was getting on. As he stood up, a book dropped from the covers of the bed, falling open to the floor. Anni Goranson's diary. He picked it up and tossed it on to a nearby chair. He had read it through completely before falling asleep. He had read most of it twice, feeling a sincere *deja vu* as he went through it, imagining many of the events she recalled vividly as they played themselves out in his mind's eye.

As he had opened the door, Stuart heard something coming along the corridor towards him. He had pushed the door almost shut again, leaving just a crack through which he could see a slit of the corridor. The sound was a heavy, dragging noise – a shuffling, lumbering set of footsteps accompanied by deep breathing that echoed off the wooden walls. He had held his breath and watched as the source of the noise lumbered into sight. It was Helena Gyles, followed closely by Forsyth Kerven. Between them they were half carrying, half dragging Benny's inert body.

Stuart had not been able to tell if she was dead or merely unconscious. But he slipped quietly from his room once they were past and followed at a distance, careful to keep out of sight. There was little he could have done immediately to help Benny. But he had followed them to try to prevent any further unpleasantness should the need arise.

They had been heading, he soon realized, for the medical centre. Perhaps they had found Benny unconscious and were taking her for some treatment. He considered offering to help, but decided against. He still had not known for certain what was happening, and he was not sure how much he trusted either Helena or Kerven. So when they reached the medical centre, Stuart had waited outside, watching from a bend in the next corridor.

The two of them emerged a few minutes later. Kerven was looking down at the floor, while Helena seemed pleased with herself and was talking to Kerven in low tones. He nodded occasionally, but showed little emotion. Stuart waited till they were out of sight. Then he counted to fifty to be sure.

There was no sign of Benny in the centre. The door to the back room that had been the makeshift mortuary was ajar, and Stuart pushed it open gingerly with his foot.

'Benny?' he called, his voice little more than a loud whisper.

There was no answer, and no sign of Benny in the room. He was about to turn and look through the rest of the centre, when he noticed the caskets. There were the two caskets that Phelps had opened when they first arrived. But beside them was now a third.

Stuart considered. Perhaps it had been there all along and he had forgotten. But no, he decided, of all the things he might have forgotten, of all his memories, this was one he was sure of. He had been in the room enough times to know that there had been only two of the caskets in there. He crossed to the third casket, ran his hand over the top of it, as if feeling for some clue as to its presence. Then he leant down and put his ear to it. He could hear nothing.

Stuart took a deep breath, and unfastened the locking clamp. He threw open the heavy lid, watching it rock slightly at the extent of the hinge.

Inside was a figure. A body. Benny.

Her clothing was frayed and torn, and her grazed, sore knees were visible where the material of the jeans had worn through. She was curled as far as the limited space in the casket had allowed, into a foetal position. The inside of the lid of the casket was battered and dented where she had hammered against it with her hands, butted it with her head, slammed her knees into it again and again as she had tried to escape from the stifling darkness. The fingernails were broken back to the quick, torn and ragged. One of the fingers on the left hand had a deep gouge in it and was bleeding

heavily. A smear of blood ran from Benny's mouth across and down her chin.

As soon as he had taken in the sight, Stuart reached inside the casket and hauled Benny's inert body out. He laid her on the floor, feeling for a pulse in her neck with one hand, the other against her bruised forehead. She was still warm, and the blood was still pumping from the wound in her finger. As he watched, her chest rose and fell suddenly and she gasped, then coughed. He got his arm under her head and raised her so she was in a sitting position. He slapped at her cheeks gently, seeing the colour return slowly to them. Her eyelids fluttered, and he held her close, rocking her gently, the palm of his hand against her cheek.

'I'll give you just half an hour to stop that,' Benny said weakly, her voice a dry gasp.

'We'd better move,' Stuart said when Benny's breathing had returned to something approaching normal. 'They might come back for you.'

Benny's laugh was a dry, humourless croak. 'I'd be long dead by now. They aren't coming back for me.'

'All the same,' Stuart said as he helped her to her feet, 'I'd feel happier if we were somewhere else.'

'Where do you suggest?'

'Does that datadisc of yours include background histories for the original crew and passengers?'

'Yes,' Benny told him. 'Yes, it does. Though I'm not sure how detailed they are.'

'Then I suggest your cabin.'

'What do you want to look at?'

Stuart paused, wondering what to tell her. Then he said, 'I'm just wondering how good a match this set of passengers is for the previous one.'

'And you think my cabin will be safer than here?' Benny asked as she shrugged off Stuart's helping hand and led the way from the medical centre.

‘They had your diary. I think they’ve already been through your stuff. They aren’t exactly expecting you to turn up and demand an explanation now, are they?’

‘I suppose not,’ said Benny. ‘Poor Anni,’ she added. ‘Still, we have learnt something.’

‘And that is?’

We can change things. Whatever is really happening here, events are not irrevocably set on the same course as last time. Anni died, and I didn’t.’

‘I’m glad it proves something,’ Stuart said.

‘Oh I’m quite pleased about it in any case,’ Benny admitted with a thin smile. ‘Never mind the empiricism.’

Rawling Hoyt was still smarting mentally from Phelps’s words. How dare the man talk to him like that? It wasn’t as if he were his father. Or Bettyana’s father, come to that. Was that her name? Whatever. Names didn’t matter.

As he left his cabin, rubbing his red eyes with his good hand, Hoyt caught a glimpse of movement. Down the corridor two figures stepped into another cabin, the door closing behind them. One of them was a man - Hoyt could not remember ever seeing him before. The other figure was a woman - Anni, that was her name, Anni Goranson.

But she was dead.

Hoyt stared at the space where the figures had stood a moment before. Then his mind cleared as if a curtain was lifted on the stage of his memory. Of course, the ghosts. Anni was dead and he had seen her ghost, like so many others they had seen over the last few days. His mind protested weakly, tried to rationalize the ghosts of Rawling Hoyt’s recollection with the increasingly dominant personality and memory of Miles Betton.

Hoyt rubbed his eyes again, and headed for the officers’ mess.

Benny’s cabin had been quickly searched in a pretty cursory manner, judging by the way things had been moved round

and drawers opened. She had not bothered to tidy up, but retrieved the datadisc from under the bedclothes.

‘Kallis Shaw,’ Stuart pointed out as the first record flashed up, ‘we have already seen is a dead ringer for Heath Chromsky. They look only slightly similar, but they both kept handwritten logbooks, and they were both quite particular about the chain of command.’

‘You mean they were noisy and arrogant.’

‘If by “arrogant” you mean overly convinced of his own superiority of position, then yes, I do. Now, let’s see what background you have on Shaw.’ He read through the notes carefully. ‘Almost dropped out of military training by the look of it. Been trying to prove himself ever since, I would guess.’

They went through each of the members of the original mission in turn. Benny would have been happy to make a quick judgment and move on. But Stuart insisted on looking through any background material on each of the people, however vague and inconsequential it might be. When it became clear that he was determined to do this, Benny gave up complaining or suggesting they move on. She was not so interested in the minutiae of their backgrounds, but she used the time to try to organize her thoughts.

‘Martia Lupis. Long dark hair compared with Helena’s shorter blonde. But Helena seems to have taken on her duties.’

‘And both,’ Benny added, ‘come across superficially as ice maidens. Cool, efficient, and almost emotionless.’

‘She lost her mother when she was a child.’ Stuart pointed out the relevant passage in the notes. ‘Maybe that has some thing to do with it.’

After the background details they continued with Miles Betton. A look at the spotty adolescent face that formed on the cabin wall was sufficient for them to move on.

‘No contest,’ Benny remarked. ‘Even without the incident with the fire.’

‘Vasco Playdon. An older man who has some sort of chip on his shoulder, it seems,’ Stuart continued, interpreting the notes.



‘And Dorian Phelps certainly thinks he should be in charge. An authoritarian father figure of the old school.’ Benny stared at the lined face on the wall. Her head was clearer now than she could remember it being for days. And there was something about all these people that she was finding odd. Something that had also occurred to her when she first met the members of her *Medusa* expedition a few days ago.

Stuart had moved on. ‘Anni Goranson. Diarist and wit.’

‘Sarcastic nerd.’

‘That too, by all accounts. No idea who she maps to in the second expedition.’

‘Good,’ said Benny. ‘Let’s move on, shall we?’

But Stuart was already reading through the small print covering Anni’s childhood.

Bettyana Quist’s picture, in contrast to the sub-passport photos of the others, was like the cover of a glamour magazine. ‘Again,’ Benny said as it flashed up, ‘no clues.’

‘Impulsive and hot-tempered.’

‘Prima donna.’ Benny’s hand went to her mouth as she realized what had been niggling her. ‘You know what?’

‘What?’

Benny shook her head. ‘Let’s finish this first, there’s only one left.’

Stuart shrugged, read quickly through the background information on Bettyana Quist, then gestured to Benny to move on.

‘Rathbone Quarrel. Quiet, logical, reasonable.’

Benny nodded. ‘Wouldn’t say boo to a goose, but will lock up defenceless women in metal caskets when they work out he’s bonking the chief steward.’

‘Really?’ Stuart seemed shocked. He looked closer at the picture of the dapper, grey-haired man with a thin moustache. ‘So, does that mean that Forsyth Kerven and Helena Gyles...?’ He let the question hang.

Benny nodded. ‘I’m afraid so. Surprised me too. It’s always the quiet ones, isn’t it?’ She frowned. ‘Maybe that’s my problem. God help them if Andrea finds out.’

Stuart held up a finger. 'Just one thing,' he asked, 'what's *bonking*?'

'It's another technical term,' Benny told him. 'You can obviously work out the meaning from its context.'

Stuart smiled. 'Yes,' he said, 'I believe I can. Is this what you were wanting to tell me just now?'

Benny shook her head. 'No. It just struck me that everyone on the first expedition, everyone we've discussed, seems almost like a caricature. I had the same thought when I met the other members of our expedition for the first time.'

'How do you mean?'

'Well, I'm not really sure. But they each seem to have one dominant characteristic. A different one in each case. Take the current team, for example. Chromsky is the arrogant leader who blusters to conceal the fact that he can't really cope. Hoyt is the inexperienced youngster who can't do enough to help.'

'Helena is the ice maiden, at least on the surface.'

'Exactly. Andrea's a selfish prima donna. Kerven is the voice of reason. Who does that leave?'

'Father-figure Phelps.'

'And us.' Benny looked him in the eye. 'I'm the sarcastic wit who drinks too much,' she said. 'What's your problem?'

The atmosphere in the officers' mess was tense. There was an edge to the air despite the relaxed appearance of the occupants. Forsyth Kerven was reading, a cup of coffee at his side. Helena Gyles was sitting by the door, as if expecting to have to greet and accommodate a party of guests at any moment. Dorian Phelps was trying to engage Andrea Moritz in conversation, and she was half listening, half answering, and half watching Forsyth Kerven as he read.

She admired the way he turned the pages of the thick leather-bound book that rested on his knee. She liked the care with which he lifted the coffee cup to his lips and replaced it gently on the saucer after he had sipped from it. She tolerated the buzz of Phelps's voice in her ear as she watched Kerven and inwardly despaired of his acknowledging

her. She had tried everything. Well, almost, she reflected as Rawling Hoyt walked stiffly into the room. Perhaps jealousy and competition might prove the key to unlocking Kerven's interest.

Andrea looked round for Rawling Hoyt. Where was the boy? She expected him to be somewhere nearby, staring at her with those large naive eyes of his. But he had stiffened when he saw Phelps and Andrea, and was now sitting on the opposite side of the room looking away from them. His hands rested in his lap and he was staring blankly at the wall.

'What's wrong with him?' Andrea interrupted Phelps's monologue.

'Who?' Phelps frowned, broken off in mid-flow. 'Oh, Betton you mean.'

'Yes.' Was that his name? She supposed it was, though it seemed not quite to fit with her memory. 'Yes, Betton. What's up with him?'

'Oh, ignore him, Bettyana. I expect he's sulking.'

Kerven had also noticed the boy's restraint. He set his book aside, placing it carefully on the table beside his coffee cup, and went over to where Hoyt was sitting. As Andrea watched, he stooped down beside the lad and spoke quietly to him. Hoyt mumbled a response, and Kerven nodded, patted him on the shoulder, then stood up straight again. He looked across at Andrea and Phelps as he walked stiffly back to his armchair. His look was laced with contempt, and Andrea found herself looking away, down at the floor, as he passed.

'Why is he sulking?' she asked, her voice husky. 'What's happened?'

'Nothing.' Phelps's reply was fast and loud.

She fixed him with what she hoped was a stare as powerful as Kerven's had been. 'Something must have happened.'

Phelps shrugged. 'I had a quiet word with him about - you know.' His mouth twitched at the corner, and he went on quickly: 'But I don't think that's really his problem. Leave him be. He won't bother you again.'

Andrea continued to stare at Phelps. His words were clicking together in her brain, and she didn't like the pattern

that was beginning to form out of them. 'You had a word with him about what?' Her voice was still quiet, but now it was low and insistent.

'You know.' Phelps shrugged.

'No I don't.' She gripped his arm. 'Tell me.'

Phelps looked down at her hand on his arm. Andrea could feel that others in the room were also now looking at her. Phelps pulled his arm free. 'I told him to lay off,' he said in a tight whisper. 'I told him you weren't interested in his sort and to quit bothering you.'

'You told him what?' She almost spat the last word at him.

'I could see he was upsetting you. Now he won't. OK?'

Andrea's short laugh was a cross between a cough and sudden exhalation. 'And since when do you decide who is upsetting me?' She was talking loudly, her eyes darkening and her cheeks red.

Phelps stood up, took a step backward. His reply was as loud as hers had been. 'I've sorted it, all right?' He looked round, as if becoming aware that they were now the centre of attention.

Andrea did not care who else was watching, who else was in the room. Her focus was on Phelps. She stood up, faced him, prodded her forefinger into his chest. 'I can sort my own life, thank you.' She was shouting now, and Phelps was almost cowering in front of her. 'I don't need your interference, your *help*. I don't need anyone telling me who I can and can't talk to, or who can and can't *bother* me.' She prodded him again, feeling him give ground. 'Whose life is this?' she screamed at Phelps. 'Do you think you're my father or something?' She turned away from him and shoved her hands deep into her jacket pockets. 'Just butt out, will you? Just piss off and sort out your own pathetic life before you try to run anybody else's.' Her hand closed around the comforting shape of the percussion pistol.

Phelps brushed against her shoulder as he pushed past. His face was red, a nerve ticking under his eye. He marched across the room and left without looking back. The door slammed shut behind him.

Andrea looked round at the others. They were all watching her, as if waiting for her to say something. She focused on Hoyt. His pockmarked face was drained of colour and he blinked as his eyes met hers. 'What's the matter with you?' she demanded.

Hoyt gulped, looked away. Then he looked back at her. 'I've just seen a ghost,' he said.

'That's hardly novel,' she rebuked him. Though at the back of her mind was a feeling that perhaps it should be.

'Anni,' Hoyt said back. 'I saw Anni. But she's dead, isn't she? I mean, Rathbone said... It must have been a ghost.' He looked away. 'And there was another one with her. One I haven't seen before. They looked so real.'

'They always do,' Kerven said gently.

'Tell me about the other one,' Helena snapped. 'The one who wasn't Anni.'

'What's to tell? It was a man. Tall, with dark hair. A beard. I never saw him before.'

'What is it?' Kerven asked Helena.

'Maybe nothing. But Shaw was banging on about a stowaway, remember?'

Kerven laughed. 'Isn't paranoia wonderful? Always something to rail against.'

'Even paranoids have enemies,' Helena said quietly.

Andrea looked from one to the other. For two people who hardly ever exchanged a word, they were very easy in each other's company suddenly. 'Where did you see these ghosts?' she asked Hoyt. Her voice was still tense and full of anger.

'Going into Anni's cabin.'

'If there is a stowaway it could explain a lot,' Helena said.

Andrea was already at the door. 'Then let's go and see,' she said.

'So where do we go from here?' Stuart asked.

'I'm not sure,' Benny said. 'We can match everyone up with the original team. With the exception of you. But the numbers match, assuming Jackson Hart was hidden away on board somewhere.'

‘But we don’t have any background on him, do we?’

‘Not that I could find. But I’m willing to bet that you and he have something in common.’

Stuart considered this, his mouth turning up slightly at the edges. ‘How’s your head?’ he asked after a while.

‘Much better.’ Benny smiled. ‘Being dead has done me the world of good.’ She stood up and walked round the room, stepping over piles of clothing and various odds and ends that had been pulled out of drawers and the wardrobe and dumped on the floor. ‘You know what I think?’ she said as she passed the door. From outside came faint sounds.

‘No, what?’

Benny did not answer at once. She held her hand up to silence him. The sounds were getting closer. Someone was approaching the cabin - several someones, by the sound of it. She could hear mumbled conversation. One word came through clearly as it was repeated: ‘Stowaway.’

‘I think,’ Benny said, ‘that it’s time we left.’

Stuart hesitated. ‘They may not be coming here.’

‘Look, they’ve tried to kill me already, and, according to the rules they now seem to be playing by, you’re the stowaway.’

He was beside her in an instant. ‘I think it’s time we left.’

Benny edged the door open a fraction. By the flickering light in the passage she could see a group of people approaching.

Andrea Moritz was at the front, Forsyth Kerven and Helena Gyles close behind, and Rawling Hoyt at the rear. They looked serious, and they looked straight at Benny.

‘Oops,’ she said. ‘Come on.’

Benny flung the door open, and they set off down the corridor at a run.

‘There he is!’ Andrea’s voice screamed after them. ‘Come on.’

The dust erupted from their feet as Benny and Stuart ran. The sounds of their pursuers were heavy in Benny’s ears.

‘Where are we going?’ Stuart asked breathlessly.

‘I’ve no idea. Any suggestions?’

‘Yes,’ he said, pushing past her. ‘Follow me.’

Fair enough, Benny thought. He did know the ship rather better than she did after all. Remarkably better in fact.

They crossed one of the open areas at a trot. Benny was breathing deeply now, the sound of the blood racing in her ears as she followed Stuart. She risked a look back, and saw that Kerven had fallen behind. Andrea was lagging, too, but Hoyt and Helena were gaining on them if anything. Helena was at the front now, moving easily, athletically. I bet she trains, Benny thought - and that's cheating.

Stuart barged shoulder first through a door. Benny dashed after him, managing to get through the closing gap before the door slammed behind her. She heard it crash open again a few scant moments later.

They were in a large games room. Several snooker tables were angled across the floor. Their surfaces were grey with dust. Stuart vaulted across the first table, his heel scuffing a trail of green across the baize surface. 'Thanks,' Benny gasped as she clambered after him. She grabbed the cue ball as she pushed herself off the other side of the table, turned and hurled it back at Helena.

The woman was in mid-leap, halfway between floor and table, as the snooker ball whistled towards her. She tried to duck, lost her tentative footing on the edge of the table, and crashed to the floor with a curse. The ball smacked into the door behind her just as it opened again. Hoyt skidded to a halt, looking for the source of the noise. 'Whoa, where did that come from?' he shouted. The ball skittered across the floor, and he started running again.

Benny was already across the next table and following Stuart out of the door. 'Where are we going?' she called after him, worried she might lose sight of him as he accelerated away.

'Ballroom,' he called back. 'See you there.'

'Thanks,' she muttered, and lurched onward down the passageway. Stuart was disappearing round the corner at the end. Benny counted the seconds. She was behind him by seven. He was waiting for her in the open area. 'Go on,' she shouted. 'Don't wait for me.' He nodded, jumped down the

three steps at the edge of the area and sprinted down the next corridor, his feet slapping on the dusty floor and sending up small grey clouds in his wake.

Benny stumbled after him. She could hear Helena close on her heels, and put on a burst of speed. Her pace quickened, but she was off balance now, and at the edge of the area, at the top of the steps. Benny's foot slipped from under her, and she crashed down the stairs, landing with a heavy thump on the floor of the corridor. Her mouth and nose were full of dust. She coughed and spluttered as she tried to pull herself to her feet, but her ankle gave way beneath her, and she slumped back down.

Helena was right behind her. She leapt down the stairs as Stuart had done, clearing Benny's prone body. She hardly gave Benny a glance, and ran on after Stuart.

Benny sat up in surprise, watching Helena as she raced along the passage. She turned her head slightly, shouting back, 'Come on, Miles. Keep up.'

There was a sudden pain in her shoulder as Rawling Hoyt's knee caught Benny in the back. She pitched forward again, expecting to find him standing over her, his hands reaching down towards her throat. But he was already racing after Helena, ignoring Benny completely.

Benny hauled herself back into the open area and sat down heavily in an armchair, massaging her ankle. It did not seem to be broken, and she found she could put some weight on it if she was careful. Just twisted, then. As she rubbed the feeling back into it, she wondered why they had ignored her. Was it because as far as they were concerned she was dead? Could it be that simple? There was one way to find out.

After less than a minute, Andrea arrived in the area. Benny had heard her rasping breath approaching, and sat back in the armchair, plainly in Andrea's line of sight. She waved and smiled to the woman as she passed, ready to run if need be. But Andrea, like Helena and Hoyt, ignored her and staggered past. She paused long enough to check where the footprints in the dust led, then followed. She glanced back as Forsyth Kerven stumbled after her.



‘Come on. They can’t be far ahead.’

Kerven paused for a moment, doubled over and breathing heavily right in front of Benny’s chair.

‘Hi there,’ she said cheerily. ‘Remember me?’

Kerven took a final deep breath, then jogged off after Andrea. Benny watched him down the corridor. ‘Apparently not,’ she murmured. Now, which was the quickest way to the ballroom?

They sat either side of one of the round tables at the edge of the dance floor. Each had their feet up on the table. That was how Benny had found Stuart, and though she could walk on her ankle now without pain, she was aware of its throbbing, and having it raised up helped.

‘You think they’ll find us in here?’ she asked.

Stuart shrugged. ‘Maybe. *Medusa*’s a big ship. There are lots of other places to look, and I led them well away before doubling back.’

Benny looked round. ‘Well, at least this is a big room. Whichever way they come in, we’re bound to have both an escape route and plenty of warning.’

‘I don’t know why you’re worried,’ Stuart said. She had told him that as far as the others were concerned she seemed to be invisible.

‘I’m worried about lots of things. They really seem to believe they’re the original crew now, you know.’

Stuart nodded. ‘I noticed. And they really believe I’m a stowaway. They probably think I killed Shaw.’

‘Chromsky.’

‘Whoever.’

‘I guess that is what happened,’ Benny said. ‘Jackson Hart stowed away. Kallis Shaw found him, and Hart murdered him. So, how come you don’t think you’re Hart, then?’ she asked him.

‘Same reason you don’t think your Anni Goranson.’

‘Ah,’ said Benny. ‘But I did. Or almost did. My diary entries changed: they were hers. I was well on the way at times. But now I’m dead there’s sort of no competition, I suppose.’

'I suppose not. But you were never as far gone as the others.'

'True,' she admitted. 'But you're not "gone" at all.'

'Puzzling,' Stuart said. 'Very puzzling. You know, Chromsky's death was an accident.'

'So?'

'So maybe we should keep an open mind about Hart. Even if he was on board, Shaw's death may have been accidental too.'

Benny leant back, tipping the chair on to its back legs. Behind Stuart she could see the long bar down one side of the dance floor. 'I was going to tell you my theory,' she said, 'before we were interrupted just now.'

'Oh yes?'

'I think it's all to do with alcohol. You see, after my medical, they told me to avoid alcohol. Mind you, they always do that. It's usually a throwback to the time when doctors tried to wean the working classes off the bottle for their own good. They'd say to avoid alcohol with any medication, though usually it had no adverse effect. It was a way of sobering the patient up a bit. It became a habit, though, persisted right through the twentieth century.' She looked back at Stuart. 'Did you have a medical?' she asked. 'Before this expedition?'

He looked blank. 'I - er, well... '

'I thought not. I reckon everyone else had theirs years ago. Mine was a last-minute rush job.'

'What was? What job?'

'Chromsky's log suggested that the team for this was actually picked ages ago, long before *Medusa* actually returned. I think at that time, the people on the team had a medical. I think they had some sort of mental implant that's taken hold over the years.'

'Mental implant? To do what?'

'Like a second personality. So that mentally, they turn into the original crew.'

Stuart rubbed his jaw. 'And you think that your implant didn't take? Is that it?'

‘Perhaps because of being done so late, so it didn’t go as deep. And the alcohol reduced the effects still further. I felt better - more myself - when I’d been drinking.’

‘Yes,’ Stuart said quietly, ‘well there’s always a chance that had nothing to do with it.’

‘Thanks. Anyway, now Anni’s character is dead, she’s past the point of no return and has stopped interfering with my brain. So do you remember a medical examination? Maybe years ago now?’

Stuart did not answer. He swung his legs off the table and leant forward, arms crossed on the table and head resting on his crossed arms. ‘If you’re right,’ he said slowly, ‘there are still a couple of questions. Like,’ he went on before she could interrupt, ‘why didn’t this secondary persona - and the flashbacks, the whole business - surface until now, until they got to *Medusa*?’

‘Good question.’

‘And, more important, why do it? What’s the purpose of it all?’

Benny rubbed her eyes. ‘I don’t know. Some sort of experiment, maybe?’

‘And why now?’

‘Because, perhaps because, there’s something here on *Medusa* that set it off. A trigger of some sort.’

Stuart exhaled slowly and loudly. ‘Then I guess our next move is to try to find it. Wherever it is.’

‘Whatever it is.’ Benny shook her head. ‘Why are these expeditions never as straightforward as they tell you they’re going to be?’

## CHAPTER 10

I remember his eyes were wide and mad as he lunged at me. I stepped aside, tried to argue with him, to present my case. But even though I had the gun, he was beyond reason. Ever since he stumbled across me down there he was beyond the point where we could discuss the matter.

Whatever it was.

He lunged again, and again I sidestepped, sending him crashing against the wall to land on his bruised ego. When he came at me the third time, it was with a length of pipe he had pulled from the darkness where he had fallen. He swung it at me. I saw the pipe approaching in a low arc, couldn't back off quickly enough. I had to parry the blow, and I raised my arm instinctively into the path of the weapon.

I felt the bone shatter on the impact. The pain swept through me like a wave of acid water, and I dropped the pistol. I can feel it still, washing through my very being and exploding inside my head. The pipe had slowed after connecting with my forearm, and I grabbed at it with my good hand, yanked and pulled at it. I had the other gun in my pocket, but I was enraged by the pain, not thinking clearly at all.

Shaw was dragged towards me, caught off balance at the extent of his swing. I twisted the pipe from his weakened grip, held it one-handed, looked into his staring eyes. And I saw he meant to kill me.

He was slow, perhaps overconfident, unable to believe he could lose this fight. Whatever the reason, he did not avoid the blow. I caught him across the side of the head, sent him crashing sideways into the wall. As he hit it, his head snapped back and there was a crack like a breaking egg. He stood there, staring back at me, unblinking.

Then he slid slowly down the wall, leaving a thick, dark, sticky trail behind him before his head slumped forward as he sat down abruptly. In the half-light I could see the crumpled back of his skull, the hair matted and torn aside. It was worse in the red light.

From somewhere behind me I could hear a voice calling.

A voice I now recognize as one of my own.

They started with the food and drink. They were talking through the possible causes of contamination, of infection.

‘But surely we’ve all been eating and drinking the same stuff,’ Stuart argued.

Benny had to agree. ‘Yes. And though we brought some of it with us, a good proportion is stuff that was already here.’

‘One element of the food, then. A particular dish.’

‘The sugar? Or salt?’

Stuart shrugged. ‘Why not?’

‘Possible. But a bit hit and miss unless someone here is deliberately giving everyone a dose.’

‘Well, it’s not the alcohol,’ Stuart said with a smile. ‘I think you’re proof of that.’

‘It’s a point, though. Chromsky tried to warn us all off the alcohol, remember?’

‘You think he knew?’

Benny thought about this. ‘No,’ she said at last. ‘No, I don’t think so. He probably knew more than anyone else, for logistical reasons. But I don’t think he really knew anything much.’

Stuart stood up and stretched. ‘So if not the food or drink, what else is there?’

‘We do not live by bread alone.’

‘So, what?’

It was like a light being turned on in Benny’s head. A sudden realization. ‘Stuart,’ she said, ‘you know this ship pretty well.’

‘I suppose so.’

‘So, where would be the best place to feed something into the air supply?’

He thought about this for a while. Eventually, he decided: 'Close to the oxygen pumps, I would think. That way it gets blown into the system right at the source.' He nodded. 'Good thinking,' he said and slapped Benny on the back. 'Let's go.'

They made their way through the ship carefully, trying to keep quiet in case one of the others was around. The last thing they wanted was another chase along the endless flickering corridors. As they made their circuitous way back towards the main docking bay - where the life-support control systems were, so they could easily be serviced from outside the ship if necessary - Benny thought.

And she wondered if mentioning her theory about the air supply to Stuart had been a good idea. He had latched on to it at once, which might be because it was a sound theory. But then again, he did know the ship extremely well - perhaps just a bit too well for someone who had not been on board much longer than herself. Coupled with that was another realization: Stuart had been put aboard before the rest of them, he said, specifically to check over and service the life-support systems. And Stuart was the only one of the team who did not seem to have been affected.

Benny let him lead, keeping a good distance between them. Just in case.

'It's no good, we lost him.' Helena Gyles had returned to the officers' mess and waited for the others to catch her up. Andrea Moritz and Forsyth Kerven were sitting in armchairs, their heads in their hands and gasping for breath. Rawling Hoyt was sitting on the floor.

Dorian Phelps was watching them with ill-concealed amusement. 'This stowaway,' he said, 'where was he headed?'

'No idea,' Helena said. 'We lost him in the forward section, but he knew we were on his tail.'

'Let me put it another way: where would *you* be heading in his situation?'

Helena's eyes narrowed. 'He knows we're on to him. He can't get away.'

‘Can’t he? He may have transport concealed somewhere for just this eventuality.’

‘So?’ Andrea said. ‘How does that help?’

But Kerven was already there. ‘The main docking bay,’ he said. ‘He could be making for the main docking bay.’

Helena nodded. ‘That would make sense.’ She looked round at them, assessed how they were doing. ‘Get your breath back,’ she said. ‘We’ll leave in five minutes.’

Once they knew what they were looking for it was obvious. Stuart had removed the wooden panelling from a section of the passageway wall just down from where Benny and the others had first entered the *Medusa*. He pointed out the oxygen pumps and the thick pipes leading away from them, revealed behind the panels. It was like something from Jules Verne - high technology fashioned out of brass and oak.

Attached to the main feeder pipe was a cylinder about the size of Benny’s forearm. It was faded red in contrast with the dusty polish of the pipe to which it was attached. There was a valve at one end, where it joined the pipe. A small red light flashed to show that the tiny pump inside the canister was working. A dial on the valve showed the canister to be close to empty.

‘This is it,’ Stuart said, tapping the side of the cylinder with a fingernail. ‘This explains it.’

‘Not quite,’ Benny said. She was feeling more secure in Stuart’s presence again as she examined the canister. ‘There’s one slight problem.’ She ran her fingers round the end of the valve, feeling the join where it met the air pipe. Beneath the dust and grime she could feel the rough flakes of rust and corrosion. She held her hand up for Stuart to see the red- brown stains on her fingers.

‘Rust?’

She nodded. ‘It’s very corroded. We’d be lucky to get it off. It’s pretty much rusted in place.’ She wiped her fingers on her jeans. They were in a bad state anyway - covered in dust and dirt and worn through at the knees. ‘And that means,’

she said, 'that this is not a new addition to the life-support systems.'

'It must have been put in when the ship was built. Or soon after,' Stuart agreed. 'Though I wouldn't have thought it would still be working.'

'Which means it's not for our benefit at all. Not exclusively, anyway. Whatever it is.' For a moment her eyes focused past Stuart, on a doorway that she had noticed when she first arrived. She read the sign by the door twice, heard the words inside her head, and another piece of the puzzle clicked into place.

'So what now?' Stuart asked her.

'Oh, now I think it's time to be honest with one another,' Benny said, the seriousness evident in her voice. 'Don't you think so, *Stuart?*'

He took a step back. 'What do you mean?'

'Remember when we first met?'

He smiled, but nervously. Even in the imperfect light Benny could see the uncertainty behind the smile. 'How could I forget?'

'Exactly. How could you forget? How could you forget your own name, even?' He said nothing, so she went on. 'I thought it was odd at the time, that maybe you hadn't heard the question when you hesitated, when you couldn't tell us your name. But it wasn't that at all, was it? Who are you?'

'I told you.' His voice was level, almost devoid of expression. 'Stuart. Stuart Stonely.'

Benny shook her head. 'I don't think so. I think Chromsky didn't expect you, didn't even know you were here. But then he never admitted a mistake. He couldn't bear to be seen to be wrong or out of touch. And I think when I asked you your name you said the first thing that came into your head, almost without thinking. Just for something to say.' Stuart did not reply. 'You didn't say "Stuart Stonely", though you recovered well when I misheard you. She pointed to the sign above the door. 'You said "Stewards Only".' She took a step towards him, hoping she looked more determined and sure than she felt. 'So who are you?'



He drew a deep breath, as if trying to decide for himself. Then he asked quietly, 'Who do you think I am, Benny?' There was an intensity in his voice, steel behind his eyes, as he spoke. He was eager for her to reply, desperate to know.

But Benny said nothing. Despite the fact that he looked different from the images stored on the datadisc, despite his age, despite the fact that he had saved her life, she thought he was Jackson Hart. Jackson Hart - psychopathic mass murderer. But she wasn't sure she wanted to tell him that. Not in case she was wrong, but for fear she might be right.

Benny's dilemma was solved before the silence grew too drawn out. There was a shout from the other end of the passageway, and the two of them turned to see Helena Gyles leading Forsyth Kerven and Andrea Moritz as they ran towards Benny and Stuart.

Stuart grabbed Benny's hand, dragging her down the corridor away from the angry shouts.

Benny pulled her hand free and ran with him, feeling the dull pain settling into her strained ankle. 'What's down this way?' she asked as they ran.

'I don't know. I've never been down here before.'

'Why not? You seem to have been everywhere else.'

Benny could see the strain and fear on his face as they ran. 'Because something terrible happened here,' he said.

'What?'

'I don't know,' he shouted. 'There's so much I don't know.'

They rounded the corner, sprinted into the open area at the end. It was a small casino, complete with croupiers' tables, chemin de fer and roulette wheel. There was a half-size billiards table at one end of the room. And by it stood Rawling Hoyt and Dorian Phelps. They were holding billiard cues.

Benny skidded to a halt as they stepped towards her. She turned back, but Helena, Andrea and Kerven were close behind, blocking any retreat. Benny backed away slightly, but none of the others made any attempt to stop her, or even seemed to notice. Their whole attention was centred on Stuart as he turned, twisted, looked for an escape route.

They spread out in a ring, blocking off any chance he might have of running for it. He paced back and forth as they closed slowly in on him. His eyes were wide with fear, as if he knew what was about to happen.

‘Something terrible happened here,’ Benny remembered him saying. As if he had known already.

‘Back off,’ Benny shouted at them. ‘Leave him alone.’ But it was as if she wasn’t there. She watched from outside the circle, frozen to the spot, uncertain what to do and not sure she could do it.

Phelps landed the first blow. It galvanized Benny into action. His cue caught Stuart in the small of the back, and he arched over, round the point of impact, his head back as he yelled out in pain. After that they all closed in, and he disappeared beneath a rain of punches and kicks. Benny hurled herself into the melee, tried to pull them away. But as soon as she pulled one of the attackers back, she had to let go to grab for another and the first rejoined the fray. Not once did any of them seem to notice that Benny was even there.

Stuart was groaning, doubled up on the floor in pain. Benny was wringing her hands, sobbing at her inability to prevent what was happening, shouting - unheard - at them to stop.

‘Let’s finish him off.’ Phelps’s voice was charged with energy and adrenaline. There was a viciousness to it Benny had not heard before. The others stood back, and Phelps raised the billiard cue above his head. Hoyt stepped forward, mirroring his action, his cue held one-handed.

Benny looked round for help, any help, and latched on to a sudden desperate idea.

Phelps brought the cue crashing down towards Stuart’s groaning body. But before it reached Stuart, it met the chair that Benny held across him. The cue snapped on the wooden seat of the chair and Benny’s hands sang with the impact where she held the chair firmly by the upright back. Hoyt’s blow followed a second later. His cue shattered as it struck the chair.

Benny held the chair out from her body, covering Stuart the best she could as he gripped the legs from below and helped take the strain. She looked away, feeling and hearing the blows as they hit home, feeling the splinters of wood that exploded from the cues and from the chair and struck the side of her face.

Then, abruptly, they stopped. Phelps and Hoyt were both sweating heavily. Phelps dropped the stump of the cue and wiped his face on his sleeve. 'So much for stowaways,' he said when he had caught his breath. Then he turned and left, the others close behind him.

'How are you feeling?' Benny asked when they had gone.

Stuart had struggled into a sitting position and was hugging his knees to his chest. 'Bruised mainly,' he said. 'But I think I'll survive. Thanks to you.' He smiled painfully. 'Now we're both dead,' he said.

'It has its advantages, it seems.' She helped him over to a couch, and he sank down gratefully into it. 'You knew that was going to happen, didn't you? You said something terrible happened here. Did you have a premonition or something?'

He shook his head. 'It's happened before. To me.' He coughed, his whole body shaking. 'So much has happened to me before, Benny. So much.'

'What do you mean?'

He was breathing heavily, his whole body shaking as he panted for air. His finger - his whole arm - wavered as he pointed over towards the roulette table. 'Over there,' he said.

'I think it was over there, the other side of the table.' Then he sank back into the couch, his hand pressed over his eyes and forehead, his chest heaving with the effort of drawing tortured breath.

Benny watched him for a while. Then she made her way cautiously to the roulette table. Beyond it she could see a low mound, something lying on the carpet. It was impossible to make it out clearly in the guttering light until she was right up close. Then she could see it was a body.

It was lying on its back, arms folded over the chest as if they had been warding off an attack, then fallen back with

exhaustion. The whole body was sheathed in cobwebs and layered with dust, but even so Benny could see it had rotted almost to the bone. A spider scuttled out of an eye socket and disappeared round the sharp angle of the jawbone.

When she got close, she could smell it. Age had drawn out most of the bitter-sweet stench long ago, but even so Benny leant her face away as she brushed at the cobwebs, pulled them clear of the single-piece coverall the corpse was wearing. It did not take long. A glimpse of the colour of the uniform or the security-service insignia on the left breast pocket was enough to tell her what she needed to know. She had seen the uniform before, in the newscasts on the datadisc Braxiatel had given her. Then it had been clean and new, illuminated by the harsh media lights in the makeshift courtroom.

The man's body was lying where he had been killed by the incensed crew and passengers of *Medusa* twenty years ago. It was Jackson Hart.

There was a low groan from the couch. Stuart had swung his legs over the side and was now sitting up. 'I think I've cracked a rib,' he complained, rubbing his chest.

'You'll be lucky if that's all.' Benny sat down beside him.

'Did you find it?' he asked quietly.

'The body? Yes. It's Jackson Hart, isn't it?'

He shrugged. 'You tell me. It's all a bit confusing.'

She almost laughed. 'That's something of an understatement. But perhaps now you'll tell me who you really are.'

He looked at her, deep into her eyes. 'Do you want an honest answer?'

She did not hesitate. 'Yes.'

'Well, you may find it difficult to believe, but to be honest I don't know.'

Benny gaped. 'What do you mean, you don't know?'

'I don't know. Just that. I don't remember.'

'Well...' Benny was lost for words. How could he not know who he was? 'What *do* you remember?' she asked.

He looked past her, into the distance. 'I remember waking up, here on *Medusa*. A long time ago. Perhaps it really was twenty years ago, I couldn't say. I read a lot. Encyclopaedias and dictionaries. Any reference books I could find. I explored the ship. Most of it, anyway. I found the bodies.' He smiled. 'There wasn't much else to do. Time passes surprisingly quickly.'

'And you remember nothing before waking up here on *Medusa*?'

'Yes and no.'

'Meaning?'

'I have... memories from earlier.' He frowned. 'But I don't think they're mine. Sometimes they're clear, but usually there's just a jumble of thoughts, of recollections, of events. They get muddled. I seem to be several different people. Sometimes they're quite separate, but sometimes they merge and get confused.'

'Could they all be memories from the same person?' Benny asked. 'Maybe some trauma, some event, caused you to lose your memory and now it's coming back in snatches.'

Stuart was shaking his head. 'No,' he said, 'they are definitely different people that I have the memories of. Some are male, some female. Some are soldiers, some scientists. I half remember being so many people.' He looked off into the distance again. 'Living,' he said quietly. 'Dying.' His voice was a whisper in the fluttering light. 'Killing.'

After dealing with the stowaway, they had returned to the officers' mess. Rawling Hoyt and Dorian Phelps were sitting together like old drinking partners, the fellowship of murder bringing them unexpectedly closer. Helena Gyles excused herself, saying she was tired and was going to lie down. Andrea watched her go, feeling a sudden elation that she had Forsyth Kerven almost to herself. She was not sure why, but Helena's presence always seemed to repress her ability to flirt with Kerven, to try to get his attention. His desire.

He seemed slightly on edge as Andrea sat adjacent to him, started to talk. He shuffled uncomfortably in his seat, and

she took this as a sign that her presence was at least having some effect. She had begun to wonder if he might simply have no interest in women at all.

But even as she felt she was making some progress, leaning close, looking into his deep, pale eyes, he stood up and excused himself.

'I'm a little tired, too. I think I'll get some rest, if you don't mind.' He avoided looking at her, and left without a further word.

Andrea watched him go, watched the steady, precise, proper movement as he walked. He did not look back. If he had, she might have interpreted his words as an offer, an invitation. But he didn't look back. She looked across at Phelps and Hoyt as they sat joking and laughing together. Hoyt saw her looking, caught her eye, and smiled.

That was all she needed. She glared back at him, took pleasure from seeing his smile fade into embarrassment. Then she followed Kerven from the room. She was not sure what she would say to him, or even if she would speak to him at all. There was some thought in her mind, an image, of her catching up with Kerven as he went into his cabin. In her imagination she saw them talking, smiling, as they balanced on the threshold of his room. Then he stepped aside, and ushered her in, closing the door behind them.

Except that as she made out Kerven's tall, erect figure along the corridor, he was not at the door of his own cabin. As she watched, the door opened, and he went inside.

Inside Helena's cabin.

For a while, Andrea stood quite still, unable to interpret what she had just seen. Her mind was numb, her brain had stopped. Time had stopped. The passageway blurred and changed around her, the lights came up and the dust receded. The shade and pile of the carpet deepened as if coloured in by the broad swift strokes of a child's paintbrush.

They were so entwined in each other's arms that they seemed to be one person. Moving, holding, clawing desperately at each other. Andrea threw the door open so hard it banged against the wall and half closed again. The

lovers froze, the light from the corridor slicing across them as they leapt apart. Kerven was flushed, his shirt unbuttoned. Helena's hair was ruffled over her face, her tunic open so that the pale skin beneath shone almost translucent in the sudden revealing luminance.

'Bettyana.' Kerven's voice was a mixture of surprise, anger and fear as he stepped towards her. Behind him, Helena pushed the hair up and out of her eyes, pulled her tunic close around her and fastened it quickly and efficiently. Andrea saw but did not notice that her feet were bare.

'Get back,' she screamed at Kerven. 'Stand still.' The gun caught in her jacket pocket, was twisted and snagged in the fabric as she tried to pull it clear.

Helena stepped forward, saw her struggle, and her eyes widened. The handle of the pistol was clear of the pocket now as Andrea wrestled it out.

'Look out, she's got a gun.' Helena's cry was urgent. She pushed Kerven past Andrea towards the door, following, elbowing Andrea aside as she went.

Andrea dragged the gun free as she struggled to retain her balance. She turned, but they were already through the door, already running. She dashed after them, saw them disappear round the corner at the end of the corridor, Helena pushing Kerven ahead of her, back towards the officers' mess.

At a run she entered the open area that separated the corridor to the mess from the one where the cabins were located. Andrea's speed thwarted Helena's attack - the chair she hurled back at Andrea caught her trailing leg, swung her round. Andrea fired as she fell, but the shot went wide. It slammed into the back of an armchair. The sound echoed round the area, escaping along the corridors that fanned out from it. Kerven was nowhere to be seen, but Helena was already running, sprinting along one of the passages, her head tilted back as she ran for her life.

The sound was clear and distinct and recognizable in the mess. Phelps and Hoyt exchanged worried looks. Then they leapt to their feet.

'Another stowaway?' Hoyt asked.

‘Let’s see.’ Phelps was already at the door. We know how to deal with their sort.’

Hoyt gulped down the remains of his drink, and followed. Phelps was striding purposefully down the corridor towards the noise. But Hoyt paused at the door to the galley. He didn’t fancy taking on an armed stowaway. He slipped inside and grabbed a heavy kitchen knife from a rack on the wall, testing the weight as he followed Phelps towards the gunshot.

The butt of the heavy handgun fitted neatly into the palm of Andrea’s hand, nestled warmly in place as if it had been made for her. She raised the gun slowly, bringing her left hand up to steady the weight, sighting along the short length of the barrel.

Helena was running in slow motion, like a dream. As she ran, she turned and looked back, the horror etched on to her face, her mouth open as she shouted. Or screamed. Her eyes were wide with fear. The pistol bucked in Andrea’s hand, snapping upward against her tight grip. The sound of the report was a long, drawn-out echo that ricocheted along the corridor.

Helena kept running. But her head was suddenly tilted back, her chest thrust forward as the bullet slammed into the middle of her back. Then she pitched forward, sliding face down along the floor. The echoes of the shot died away, were superseded by the cadence of her dying scream.

Another sound, from behind her, made Andrea turn back. It was a low moan, almost a whimper. As she looked round the area, traced a line across it with the gun, she made out Kerven cowering behind one of the chairs. She stepped towards him, the gun raised and aimed. The pressure of her finger on the trigger was a comfort, an almost sensual release.

But before she fired, a movement in the corner of her eye distracted her. She whirled round, to face it. Her finger, already applying pressure, completed its task and the pistol fired again.



Phelps was leaping up the steps from the corridor from the mess into the area when the shot hit him. It stopped him dead on the top step, his foot still raised, frozen in motion. A dark hole appeared in the centre of his forehead and his eyes rolled upward as if he were trying to look at it. At the same time his mouth dropped open, slack and loose. Then he fell backward, crashing down the steps.

Andrea blinked, surprised. But her surprise distracted her only for a moment. Then she turned back to face Kerven again. He was standing in front of her, not cowering now, but angry.

‘Look,’ he shouted at her, and she trembled at the force of his voice. ‘Look what you’ve done, you bitch!’ He was shaking his head, breathing heavily, his teeth gritted.

She still had the gun levelled at him. She could feel the wetness on her cheek. ‘I wanted you,’ she said, her words all but lost in the sob. ‘I wanted you so much.’ The gun was heavy in her hand, drooping, lowering.

Sudden movement. She caught sight of the knife out of the corner of her eye. It slashed down towards her, the light glinting and flickering on the polished blade. She turned, but too late. The blade made contact, sliced through her blouse, ripped into the flesh beneath. She gasped out loud as it tore into her chest, tearing, ripping through.

Andrea heard the explosion of the shot even before she realized what was happening, saw Rawling Hoyt’s body thrown across the room, the hand that had held the knife clenched on empty air, spasming, clutching as he landed on his back. He struggled to sit up, but could not manage. A wash of blood erupted from his mouth, splashing on to his shattered chest. Then he slumped back. His leg twitched for a moment, then he was still.

The pain turned everything red as she pulled at the knife in her chest. A dark stain was already spreading round it, a splash of colour across her pale clothing. Another hand closed round Andrea’s, and Forsyth Kerven gave a sharp pull on the hilt of the knife. It came free with a sucking sound, and she felt the warm liquid which followed it on her

stomach. She grabbed at Kerven, clutched him, held him, pulled him towards her. She heard the knife clatter to the floor.

He lifted the gun gently from her hand, and pulled her close. She felt his embrace, as warm as the blood that was soaking into them both. At last. At last she had him. She nestled her face into Kerven's shoulder, felt his body shaking with emotion, racked with his love for her.

Benny paused at the foot of the steps. Phelps's body was lying staring up at her. The hole in his forehead was like a third eye, open and dark and blank. Staring. She stepped over the body, only vaguely aware that Stuart was close behind her.

It was like a tableau from an ancient Greek tragedy. Hoyt was sprawled in a crumpled and bloody heap on the far side of the area. Forsyth Kerven and Andrea Moritz were tightly embraced in the centre of the room. Kerven seemed to be holding her up. Blood dripped from them, forming a red ring around them as it soaked into the dusty carpet. Andrea's head was resting on Kerven's shoulder. Her features were pale but otherwise as immaculate and beautiful as ever. She had not a hair out of place. She was smiling, her eyes wide open, unfocused, dreaming.

The only movement was Kerven's right hand. The hand that held the gun. Slowly, steadily, he brought the gun up, until it was pressed to the back of Andrea's head. Benny wanted to call out, to tell him to stop - that it was already finished and he was free of it. But her voice died in her dust-dry throat.

The sound was deafening. Benny screamed despite herself, her hands to her mouth to try to keep the emotion pressed inside.

Andrea's perfect head exploded in a shower of blood and bone. The bullet, slowed by the obstruction, ripped into Kerven's throat, tearing a wide hole from which a wave of red poured out like a viscous waterfall. He dropped Andrea as he clutched at the gaping hole, and sank to his knees. The gun

fell from his hand, and rolled under a nearby chair. Then, his hands still clawing at his windpipe, Kerven rolled on to his side, spasmed, and was still.

Benny turned away. She buried her face in Stuart's shoulder in an instinctive replay of Andrea's final pose.

'Let's get out of here,' he said. He led her back along the passageway towards the ballroom.

## CHAPTER 11

They went back to the ballroom by way of the main docking area. Stuart wrestled for a full minute with the corroded valve on the cylinder that was linked into the air supply. Eventually he managed to shut off the supply of whatever gas it contained. Not, he told Benny, that there was much left in the canister. But they both felt better knowing the air was no longer being polluted.

Benny was still shocked and numbed by the events she had witnessed. Sure, she had seen people die before. But never quite as pointlessly, quite as theatrically, or with quite so much mess. She spent a while behind the ballroom bar prising apart cobwebs and going through the dusty bottles in search of some decent medicine.

‘Not as cool as it should be, but it will have to do,’ she told Stuart as she blew the dust off a good vintage champagne. The cork was practically rotted to the top of the bottle, though the tiny StasisFizz™ field inside powered by the potential energy of the bubbles (©Lansinger, patent pending) would have preserved the wine in perfect condition. She did not waste time on the cork, but gave the neck of the bottle a good smack on the side of the bar. The champagne exploded out in a stream of effervescence mingling with the dust and running in dirty bubbling rivers across the wooden surface.

Benny managed to spill some of the liquid into two almost acceptably clean glasses. She waited for the fizz to subside, then topped them up and carried them across to the table where Stuart was sitting. Their usual table, she mused.

‘Cheers.’

He raised the glass to her, then sipped. ‘Ah. I don’t know that I’ve ever had champagne before,’ he said. ‘But I do remember the taste.’

Benny shook her head. 'It may be over,' she said, 'but it's not over. If you know what I mean.'

'We're out of the woods, but we haven't properly identified the trees.'

They sipped in silence for a while. Benny tried to think through what they knew, what she could be sure of. Stuart was not Jackson Hart, and while she did not know for certain that she could trust him, he had saved her life. And there was nobody else. And whatever logic and reason might tell her about his fantastic lack of life story, she actually did trust him.

'We know quite a lot, I think,' Benny said at last. 'We just need to piece it together.'

'Go on. We've got a while before we reach Dellah or any rescue ship finds us.'

'Well, first off, I think the original *Medusa* mission was more than just a proving flight.'

'It certainly ended up that way.'

'And so did this one. The same way. And not by coincidence, either.' Benny grimaced, and removed a small piece of bottle glass from the tip of her tongue.

'True,' Stuart agreed. 'The crew was picked to match up with the original team.'

'Yes. As if someone knew that events would be repeated. Or wanted events to be repeated.'

'But why?'

Benny drained her glass. She went over to the bar and collected the bottle. She refilled Stuart's glass first, then her own. 'It has to be something to do with the people, with the composition of the crew. That's the constant thing.'

'Are you suggesting that *Medusa*'s maiden flight was actually some sort of experiment? Something more than just the remote-control thing?'

Benny nodded. 'And it went wrong. Perhaps because of Jackson Hart's intervention. Perhaps for some other reason.'

'He was one of the original research team - maybe he was a part of it.'

‘Maybe. But whatever the reason, the experiment failed. Or needed to be rerun at any event.’ Benny sat back and put her feet up on the table. ‘And we’re the second attempt. Well,’ she added with an apologetic smile, ‘I am, anyway.’

Stuart twisted the stem of his glass between his thumb and forefinger. ‘But what’s the point? What were they trying to achieve? If it was something to do with the crew then perhaps it’s a psychological thing. Looking at how teams interact, something like that.’

‘I doubt if it’s that straightforward,’ Benny said thoughtfully. ‘They went to a lot of expense and trouble to set this up. Twice. Even if it was coincidentally an ideal testing environment the first time, why wait for *Medusa* to come back to rerun it - whatever it is?’ She sighed. ‘I think you’re right about the team thing, though. It’s all to do with getting the right mix of people together on board this ship.’

‘That would explain why they were worried about replacing what’s-her-name - the one you took over from.’

‘Maryann Decliter. Then there’s the medical, the brain bit. Again trying to recreate the first group of people for a second go at things.’

‘You said -’ Stuart’s voice was quiet and slow ‘- that you thought everyone on board was a caricature. That they each exemplified some particular character trait.’ He shrugged. ‘I’m paraphrasing.’

‘It’s to do with the mix,’ Benny said. Her glass was nearly empty, and so was the bottle. ‘It’s something to do with having exactly the right mix of personalities on board. And then pumping something, some gas or chemical, into the air supply. Then Jackson Hart got on board, and having a spare psychopath contaminating the experiment had a rather extreme effect on things.’ She put her glass down on the table and leant forward, her fingers tracing the edges of the base of the glass on the dusty tabletop. ‘We’re not getting anywhere with the specifics, so let’s generalize.’

‘OK.’

‘What do we know about experiments? In general?’

Stuart cocked his head to one side. 'An experiment,' he said, 'is a test or investigation conducted and quantified to provide evidence for or against a given hypothesis.'

'Thank you,' Benny said with undisguised sarcasm. 'Very helpful.' Then she frowned. 'Wait a moment, "conducted and quantified". Does that mean -'

But, before she could finish, the world changed.

The first thing Benny noticed, the thing that caused her to stop in the middle of her thought, was the music. Faint at first, it rose in volume until it filled the room. She recognized it at once – it was the music of the waltz to which she had danced with the ghost of Jackson Hart. She looked over at Stuart, and could see from the way he was turning, scanning the room, that he heard it too.

Next the light changed. The faint flickering of the makeshift wall lights was drowned by the incandescent brilliance of the chandelier. The sudden light sent the dust and cobwebs, the trappings of age, scurrying for cover like a strong breeze. Only Benny and Stuart seemed unaffected. Their glasses shone clean, and the champagne bottle's neck was complete and intact, though the bottle remained empty.

'You see it too,' Stuart said, reaching across the pristine white of the tablecloth and taking Benny's hand in his. 'It's not just me.'

She nodded. 'But I don't think it's real,' she said. 'That is, I don't think it's anything to do with the experiment. I don't think it's really happening. It's some sort of side effect of the replay. It's as if time is getting confused, and letting us see how it really was. Like it can't decide which period it's supposed to be playing.'

Stuart's comment, if he made one, was obliterated by the sudden sound of breaking glass and of wood crying out in pain. Benny had heard that sound before, remembered it vividly. She turned at once towards the central pillar. She was just in time to see it explode outward again.

Glass and wood splinters showered down on both Stuart and Benny. They threw their hands up to protect their faces and eyes. The whole side of the pillar had cracked open and

shattered. A torrent of dark viscous liquid poured through the opening, washing across the filthy floor towards them. It swirled round the legs of the table, soaking into the carpet and washing across the polished wood of the dance floor.

Benny watched, transfixed. She knew what came next. Sure enough, a pale arm reached out from inside the pillar. The white hand clutched at the broken frame as if it were a door. A dark shadow balanced on the threshold.

She heard Stuart gasp. She could hear the blood rushing in her own ears as the figure stepped uncertainly out, into the light. It was a man. Tall, with dark hair. He looked perhaps twenty years old at most. He was completely naked, though the dark liquid clung stickily to his body, making it look stained and tarnished. He took a faltering step forward, his feet slipping and sliding in the pool of oily liquid. Then, as Benny watched, he stumbled, and sank to his knees. He knelt, motionless, staring at Benny yet not seeing her. His expression was a mixture of confusion, pain and innocence.

And although it was twenty years younger and clean shaven, his face was recognizably Stuart's.

Stuart - the young, naked Stuart - reached out towards them, as if trying to bridge the gap, to defy the years that separated them. His fingers convulsed, clutching at the ends of his outstretched hands and arms. His whole being pleaded for help as he faded slowly, silently away.

The light died to the strength of a fluttering candle. The dust and decay clung at the back of Benny's throat and in her nostrils once more.

'My God.' Stuart's voice was a croak of dry-throated realization.

Benny reached across the grimy table, put her hand to his mouth before he could say anything more. 'Remember what I said,' she told him in a whisper. 'Remember that only you and I saw that.'

He was confused. 'What does that matter? There's nobody else here.'

'I think that's true. But you said an experiment was conducted and quantified to prove a hypothesis.'



‘So?’

‘So how is an experiment usually quantified?’

His face cleared. Then he gave a low whistle. ‘By observation of the process and results.’

‘Exactly.’ Benny’s voice was hushed. She was still leaning across the table. ‘If this is an experiment, then someone, somewhere, is observing it.’

They both looked round, as if half expecting men in white coats to enter with clipboards. But they were alone.

‘But the experiment is over, surely,’ Stuart said. ‘Why don’t they show themselves, tell us what’s been going on?’

The voice seemed to come from all around them, rather like the music had done. ‘I was holding out for a discussion of Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle actually,’ Taffeta Graize said. ‘But I suppose I shall have to do without.’ She was standing beside them, impossibly she was right at the table, her ice-blond hair contrasting with the black of her suit. ‘May I sit down?’

Benny said nothing, just gestured to a chair midway between herself and Stuart.

‘Thank you.’ Suddenly she was sitting at the table. There was no movement: one moment she stood beside them, the next she was seated. ‘I won’t join you in the champagne, if you don’t mind.’ As she spoke, her face shimmered slightly, misphasing, then adjusting for the low ambient light. ‘Being only a similarity, I couldn’t lift the glass.’

‘So why bother to show yourself now?’ Benny asked.

‘It seemed like an appropriate juncture.’

‘Come to join the fat lady in a duet?’

Graize’s image frowned. ‘Thanks to Chromsky’s limited technical expertise I’m tapped into the observation systems that monitor this entire ship. I don’t believe there are any clinically obese females on board.’

‘None that can hold a perfect F sharp, I’ll grant you,’ Benny admitted. ‘So Chromsky was in on things, was he? We thought as much.’

To an extent. Rather less than he himself believed, in fact.’

‘And he ensured the communications equipment, all the equipment in fact, failed? And turned the pump on the gas canister back on, whatever that might be for?’

Graize seemed amused. ‘You obviously want to talk a little. You’re curious. It’s natural I suppose, and I am happy to indulge you a little. Since my ship is still an hour out from *Medusa*, we have time to kill.’ She smiled, and leant forward, her elbows almost meeting the tabletop. ‘What would you like to know?’

Stuart spoke before Benny could. ‘Do you believe in ghosts?’ he asked.

‘What an absurd question. Of course not. Though I know from the transcripts of some of the conversations we monitored on board that some of the more, shall we say, “fanciful” members of the expedition might beg to disagree.’

Stuart shot Benny a glance. She smiled back. She had been right about that at least.

Graize did not seem to notice. She was still talking: ‘And I must apologize for my own appearance,’ she said. ‘The power supply on *Medusa* has a slightly different phase regulator to the modern standard, which is why I keep flickering. Normally, you would never know I wasn’t real.’

‘Do you know who I am?’ Stuart asked when she had finished.

‘No more than you would have us believe you do yourself, I fear.’ Graize shrugged. ‘Not that it matters much. Perhaps Chromsky really did send you on ahead to scout things out, though that seems rather too organized and sensible for him.

So maybe you stowed away on the original *Medusa* mission, in which case you must be exceedingly bored by now. No doubt we shall find out in due course.’

Benny went in search of another bottle of champagne. She wasn’t sure she actually wanted to drink any, but she reckoned that if Taffeta Graize thought they were relaxed and a little squiffy she was more likely to speak openly about what was going on. She knocked the top off the bottle, and filled three glasses. She handed one to Stuart and placed a

second in front of Graize's holographic image. Graize stared down at it.

'I'll feel more comfortable if it at least *looks* like you're joining the party,' Benny told her. 'Your monitoring must be pretty comprehensive for you to know the glass was there,' she added, trying to sound casual, not too interested.

'Technology has come a long way in the last twenty years. A couple of subspace transmitters linked into the existing local holonet, and we have a simularity of the ship which we can navigate ourselves around. We can wander at will through the whole of *Medusa*, and watch you in real time.' Her smile was as insincere as it was unreal. 'I've watched over your shoulder while you've written your diary.'

Benny tried not to think what else Graize and her team, whoever that might include, had watched from afar. I take it that wasn't possible with the original experiment?

'Sadly not. We had no remote monitoring except through standard communications and the guidance control systems.'

'So, it was an experiment, then.' Benny sipped at her champagne, trying to make it look as though she was drinking more than she was. 'And not just in remote-guidance technology.'

'Of course.'

'Are you going to tell us any more than that?' Stuart wondered out loud.

Taffeta Graize's bloodless lips curled upward slightly in a semblance of a smile. 'You have to remember there was a war on at the time. There was a lot of store set by keeping Dellah neutral, building on the good fortune that kept us clear of the war for so long. Nobody wanted to attract any attention to the place.'

'Very wise,' Benny said. She was just making a trivial comment - there was no real thought behind it other than to show interest and keep Graize talking. So she was surprised by the vehemence of the reaction it provoked.

'Wise? It was criminal.' Graize's hands remained folded on the table in front of her, but they quivered slightly. The angry tension in her body was emphasized by the mis-phasing of

the holographic field. 'They stuck their heads in the sand. There was no way that Dellah would have been left alone if the war had not gone our way. Do you think for a moment that *they* would have continued their advance on Earth's empire, crushing and exterminating everything in their way, but ignored Dellah?' She shook her head. 'There was no such thing as neutral. Only blind luck. But people couldn't see that, wouldn't admit the danger we were really in.'

'So why shoot *Medusa* off into space?' Benny asked. 'Wouldn't that have attracted attention if anything?'

'We thought it was worth the risk.'

Stuart played with the stem of his glass. 'Are you saying that the remote-guidance experiment was actually part of the war effort? That it was some sort of military research?'

Graize snorted in amusement. 'There were probably military applications for it. But nothing obvious. If there had been, the university authorities would never have sanctioned the launch. It was an idealistic world of spineless peacemakers, of pacifist cowards who remained wilfully blind to the possibilities and potential of the unique skills and talent we had on Dellah, at the Advanced Research Department. Nobody was interested in military research. You had your tickets booked for you on the next flight out if you even mentioned it openly. Almost.'

Benny leant back, tilting her chair on its hind legs. 'I've heard it described as a great and wonderful time, when research and academic pursuits were genuinely focused on the greater good; when the researchers and scientists were able for once to turn their attention to the Big Questions that they felt needed answering; when knowledge and learning was preserved on Dellah while all around it was lost in the onset of a new dark age.'

Graize was not impressed. 'It survived through luck, pure and simple. Not through some altruistic gesture or philanthropic UTOPIAN VISION.'

'So what did you attempt to do about it?' Benny asked. 'What exactly was the *Medusa* experiment?'

Graize cocked her head slightly to one side. 'You were speculating earlier that it was something to do with personalities, to do with the mix of characters on the original *Medusa* voyage. You were right, of course.'

Benny and Stuart both grinned despite themselves. 'Genetics of some sort?' Stuart asked.

Graize raised her eyebrows, apparently impressed. 'Actually, yes. The goal was to combine the character traits, the personalities, of a selected group of people, and from that synthesize a life form imbued with all their knowledge and experience and skill.'

'The people on *Medusa*,' Stuart said quietly. It was an observation, a realization rather than a question.

Benny glanced at Stuart. Then she asked, 'But couldn't that be done anywhere? I mean in any controlled environment under experimental conditions.'

'In theory, yes, of course it could. We tried several tests with volunteers gathered together and contributing their mental energies and psychomemory traits. But we couldn't get it to work.' Graize shrugged. We never isolated the problem. Perhaps we could have done, given time. But time was not on our side in the war. So the solution we hit upon was to create an environment where the test subjects we wished to tap had to rely on their raw mental skills and abilities, where the personalities were forced strongly to the fore.'

'And that was *Medusa*.'

'It was.' She waved a hand over the table, and an image swam into view, shimmering above the dusty surface. It showed *Medusa* standing upright on the ground against a huge gantry. A walkway extended as they watched, from the gantry to the ship. A group of people made their way across the narrow walkway, the image zooming in on them as they waved to the unseen camera.

Benny recognized them all, but whether or not Taffeta Graize knew that Benny and Stuart had already seen the same news footage, she pointed out each as the camera lingered on them. 'The *Medusa* team was chosen very

carefully,' she said. 'They each exhibited a distinct and discrete set of character traits. Kallis Shaw, the captain. He was arrogant and officious. He didn't suffer fools gladly.' Shaw moved out of the image, giving way to the next members of the team as they followed him. 'Chief steward Martia Lupis - jaded, cynical, pessimistic. Contrast her with Miles Betton, the junior steward - impressionable and naive.' They followed Shaw into the ship.

The passengers followed, decked out in their finest period clothes for the occasion. Graize continued her documentary description: 'Vasco Playdon, authoritative and over bearing. Bettyana Quist, impulsive and hot-tempered. Very self-assured.' Bettyana smiled at the camera. Her face was perfectly made up for the occasion, her clothes more flamboyant and extravagant than any of the others.

'Then there's Anni Goranson.' Taffeta Graize looked directly through the projection at Benny as she described Anni. 'Witty and independent. A bit of a loner, but introspective. For example, she kept a diary.'

'I know,' said Benny softly. 'I've read it.' She had also, in a way, written it. But she said nothing about that.

'And finally Rathbone Quarrel. A gentleman of the old school. Logical and reasonable.'

The image faded, leaving Taffeta Graize's smile hanging in the air behind it.

'A good mix,' Benny said. 'A set of people practically guaranteed not to get on with each other.'

'Of course. And when we cut the communications link and left them as they thought entirely on their own, they were forced to fall back on their own skills and improvisations. Their personalities really came to the fore then as they both clashed and became more dependent on each other. A little addition to the air supply was designed to speed things on their way.'

'You seem very smug,' Stuart said. 'Especially considering it all went wrong.'

Graize frowned, as if unhappy to be reminded of the fact. We lost guidance as well. And the reports from the monitoring systems stopped.'

Benny laughed. 'So you couldn't tell if your experiment was working or not.'

'No. No, we couldn't. We didn't know what had gone wrong, though we were pretty sure by then that Jackson Hart had somehow managed to get on board. There was no chance of a recovery mission of course, partly because of the expense but mainly because of the war. *Medusa* was skirting close to enemy territory when we lost her. But we did know from the elliptical course settings when we lost control that it was probable that sometime in the next thirty years *Medusa* would return to this sector.'

Benny made a show of sipping at her champagne. 'Let me see if I can guess the rest of it,' she said setting her glass down among the rings in the dust on the table. 'Knowing that *Medusa* would return, or hoping she would anyway, you planned for that time. You put together another team which mirrored the original crew and passengers, the original experimental group. You couldn't get a perfect match of course, so you arranged for them to have certain medical treatments to steer their personalities in the right direction.' She looked into Graize's eyes, wondering whether her actual viewpoint was in fact anywhere near the similarity's point in space. 'How am I doing?'

'Not bad. The idea was to rerun the experiment with another group. They weren't told this, of course. Except for Chromsky, since we needed his help with setting things up once on board. The implanted personality enhancements would only kick in when the subjects breathed in the chemicals added to *Medusa's* air supply, so there was no problem keeping things under wraps. Partly we wanted to rerun the experiment. Partly we thought we might need to try to re-create whatever happened on *Medusa* the first time round, under stricter monitoring this time.'

'And then *Medusa* showed up. And Maryann Declleiter died.'

‘Yes. That was unfortunate. We needed a replacement in a hurry. You weren’t ideal, I’m afraid, Benny. So the implant was more severe than we would have wished. And it didn’t have time to mature, to inveigle its way into your subconscious. But I have to say that despite the problems and your unfortunate addiction to alcohol you performed superbly.’

‘Thanks,’ Benny said flatly. ‘And for your information, it’s a habit. Not an addiction.’

‘If you say so.’

‘I should in all fairness point out, though,’ Benny said, ‘that there don’t seem to be any synthetic life forms popping out of the woodwork. So I assume this experiment has failed as well.’ She smiled. ‘Which really just leaves the question: Are you coming to rescue us or to kill us?’

‘If she wants to kill us,’ Stuart asked, ‘why doesn’t she just shoot the ship down?’

‘Might attract too much attention. Everyone knows about *Medusa* now, so if it never shows up that could be a problem.’

Graize was shaking her head. ‘What pessimistic and fatalistic people you are.’ The similarity flickered as if agitated. ‘But for your information, and despite your survival, the experiment seems to be doing fine. According to our monitoring, the synthetic life forms have absorbed the keyed personality traits, skills and memories. The chemicals in the air also galvanize the projection of these memories and personality factors. They are picked up and channelled according to a preset program into the template life forms.’

Benny listened, attentive. That might explain the timeslips, the fact that memories seemed to be held in the environment and replayed.

Graize was still talking. ‘The possibilities are endless, although you probably don’t yet appreciate that. Imagine the advantages of inbred telepathy, for example. Or of interrogating prisoners of war by simply transferring their memories to a template creature programmed to answer any and all of your questions. Surrogate people, preprogrammed



and directed, could replace the originals, could even enhance the originals.'

'You see these creatures as weapons?'

'Of course.'

'So where are they then?'

Graize looked down at the table, at the glass of champagne in front of her. Or appeared to. 'I have to admit that we lost one of them,' she said after a while. 'The support tank seems to have been damaged, probably during the "interactions", shall we say, between the experimental subjects. The monitoring system shows that the support tank now contains no life form, so we must assume that the control organism is dead.' She looked up. 'But the others are doing fine. There are twelve other synthetic life forms aboard. I have now activated them and they should emerge fully formed and sentient in - oh - about thirty minutes, I suppose.' She tilted her head and smiled. 'Just in time to meet my ship.'

'Hello, Mum,' Benny said without humour. 'So these life forms are fully rounded personalities built on the characteristics inherited from the two experimental teams of people, yes?'

Graize considered. Then she said, 'No. The control creature was something along those lines. But the others were more specifically programmed. Remember, there was a war on when we started this.'

'So you said.'

'The main requirement was for troops.'

'You've developed soldiers?' Stuart asked.

'Exactly. We have channelled all the negative and aggressive emotions and traits from the subjects - from both sets, in fact - into the template creatures. They will be the ultimate soldiers. Emotions geared towards fighting and aggression, and experiences, memories and skills directed to the same ends. Their bodies fashioned for combat.' She shrugged, 'Baring whatever side effects there are from over immersion in the growth fluids.'

Benny's mind was racing. She had seen just how aggressive and negative the members of the *Medusa*

expedition could be, close up. The idea of rolling all that together into a single creature, then duplicating it a dozen times, did not sound very comforting. 'What do you mean, fashioned?' she asked.

'The bodies are engineered, grown if you like, within an incubation tank which re-creates the conditions of the womb. Cells are allowed to grow naturally to a predetermined shape and size over a framework made of biodegradable threads.' Graize waved a hand dismissively. 'The process is well understood. It's been used for tissue engineering to replace skin grafts and to grow replacement bone, cartilage and ligaments since the late twentieth century. It's hardly novel.' She leant forward. 'But with the implanted composite personality and a biosynthetic command system so that the creatures are obedient to a controller's will, that is the stuff of genius. Don't you think?'

Before Benny could disagree, Stuart cried out, as if in sudden pain. He stood up, pointing across the room. Benny swung round quickly to look. He was pointing at the area behind the bar, but as far as she could see there was nothing there. She turned back in time to see him slump into his chair, his hand reaching across the table, fingers clutching at the air.

From somewhere in the distance, Benny could hear Taffeta Graize's voice. 'And to answer your specific question from earlier,' she was saying as Stuart's eyes rolled white and he fell forward, 'of course I'm going to kill you.'

## PART THREE

### VERDICT

## CHAPTER 12

It started with a feeling of nausea. At first Stuart thought it was a direct reaction to Taffeta Graize's explanation, to his realization of who and what he really was. But it was more than that. He could hear the music of the waltz in his head again, echoing round his skull like a children's rhyme that you can't think away. The music grew louder and louder, distorted as if he were hearing it through water. Through a viscous nutrient liquid recreating the conditions of the womb.

His mind, his memory, reeled. Images hurled themselves forward in his brain, each demanding attention, each wanting to replay its tiny piece of personal history. Stuart felt himself start to shake under the pressure, felt himself slipping away. Graize was saying something, but he could no more decipher her words than he could keep his eyes focused. The world went suddenly grey, and he realized he was staring, unfocused, at the dust-laden surface of the table as it rushed up towards him.

And then he was back there, within himself as it happened, reliving the memory.

I remember my birth as if it were yesterday. The darkness held me tight, fluid, warm. Forever, I floated in a soft emptiness, devoid of memory and thought. Then, the emptiness ruptured, broke apart, and released me into the darkness of the world.

I was alone, caught between being and having been, between newborn-naive and experienced-ingenuer. Alone with the memories that crowded in on me, brought me down, screamed for a share of my attention. My life.

*And then the wall cracked open like an egg, and they came for me.*

Benny's immediate thought was that Graize had somehow started already - that she was killing Stuart while Benny sat there watching. She leapt up and ran round the table, pulling Stuart back upright in his chair. His eyelids fluttered, but otherwise he seemed to be in a dead faint.

Benny looked back at Graize, knowing that her expression as well as the tension in her body would be making her feelings apparent. Not that it really mattered now. But Graize's singularity seemed as surprised as Benny, though somewhat less concerned.

'Is he like this often?' she asked.

'If you're as clued up on things as you claim, you should know,' Benny shot back.

'Oh, I'm afraid I haven't had the time, or the inclination for that matter, to give my full attention to every little detail of your trivial lives.'

Benny ignored her, concentrating instead on trying to slap a little colour back into Stuart's cheeks. 'Come on,' she coaxed, aware of Graize's amused attention. 'Wake up.'

To her relief, Stuart's eyes flicked open. He stared up at her for a moment, seeming to have difficulty focusing. Then he grabbed her hand tightly in his own. 'I remember,' he hissed. 'At last, I remember.' Then he leapt to his feet. The chair skidded backward behind him, losing its balance and toppling over so that its back hit the ground with a smack. 'This way.'

Stuart dragged Benny away from the table, across the ballroom towards the bar. Benny struggled to stay on her feet. Her knees knocked into a chair, sending it flying, and she realized with a gasp of laughter that she had passed through the similarity of Graize, kicking her chair out from under her. She glanced back, as Stuart dragged her to the bar.

'You can't get away, you know.' Graize remained calm. 'I can follow you wherever you go. The similarity of *Medusa* is keyed to you; we can track you anywhere on the ship. The confidentiality of the experiment will be maintained.'

Benny laughed again. Partly it was the champagne. Partly it was the fact that a man was physically dragging her to a bar. Partly it was the sight of Taffeta Graize, so calm and cool, still seated at the table despite the fact that the chair she thought she was sitting on was on its side, halfway across the dance floor.

Despite her amusement, she managed to keep up with Stuart without tripping or stumbling. When they reached the bar, he finally let go of her hand. He leapt over the counter, and started hammering at the wood-panelled wall behind.

‘It’s here,’ he insisted as he worked his way along the wall. ‘Here somewhere. I know it is. I remember.’

‘But what?’ Benny asked as she ran to join him. ‘What do you remember?’

The world held him tight and warm and safe. He pushed his hands through the thick darkness, feeling for the limits of his universe, sensing the smooth curved edge of things. And through the oily blackness, as memories and characters vied for preference, fought for attention in his mind, he could hear the music. It vibrated through the liquid atmosphere, drumming against his ears and tingling his whole being.

He pushed against the limits, bracing his body, kicking at the edge of the world. And it gave under the pressure. He felt the sudden crack as the wall gave way, and he increased the pressure. The liquid began to drain away with a soft gurgling sound, and he hammered at the cracked wall, knowing that it was cutting into his fists even as it splintered and broke.

Behind the wall was another wall, harder yet less strong. He kicked at it, frantic as the music built and swelled in his head. The panels gave way, exploding outward under the fury of his onslaught. The light streamed in even as the viscous liquid that had held him, had been his world, cascaded out through the widening aperture. He gripped the edge of the hole he had made, and stepped through into the world beyond. Into the light.

Andreni was leaning back in his chair, his eyes closed, letting the music wash over him. One hand beat the tempo in the air, conducting an invisible orchestra.

‘Hell!’

Macneeson’s shout broke into the waltz and snapped Andreni upright in the chair. ‘What?’ He was already whirling round, scanning along the bank of monitors that filled the wall.

Macneeson was pointing at one of the video images, his mouth hanging open. Then he shook his head and seemed to regain control of himself. ‘Will you shut that sodding noise off?’ He snapped. ‘The control’s broken out of its tank.’

Andreni swore. He skidded his chair across so he could see the monitor Macneeson was still pointing at. It showed a man. He was tall, with dark, wet hair. He looked perhaps twenty years old at most, and he was completely naked, though the dark liquid clung stickily to his body, making it look stained and tarnished. He was standing, swaying uncertainly in front of the shattered remains of one of the ornate pillars in the ballroom.

As Andreni and Macneeson watched, the man took a faltering step forward, his feet slipping and sliding in the pool of oily liquid. Then, as Andreni watched, he stumbled, and sank to his knees. He knelt, motionless, staring at the two watchers yet not seeing the concealed camera. His expression was a mixture of confusion, pain and innocence.

Andreni swore again. ‘What does the monitor say? Is he viable yet?’

‘God knows. The readings are dead. The sensors just record that there is no life form present in the tank.’

‘We can see that,’ Andreni said.

‘The equipment senses no life form, so it thinks he’s died.’ He grinned suddenly. ‘In fact, it’s the opposite but the stupid machine doesn’t realize that.’

‘Yeah.’ Andreni shut the music off. He had enjoyed hearing it echo round the empty ship, play over the dead bodies and through the deserted ballroom, resounding back to him through the small speakers beside each of the video

monitors. But now it was a distraction. 'Let's bring him in for analysis.' He turned to look at the operating couch laid out behind them. A tray of surgical instruments stood ready on a low table beside it. Monitoring equipment was powered up and running. It waited only for a subject. Beyond it a door led out to the cramped and Spartan living quarters.

On the screen, the naked figure slipped in the liquid and collapsed to his knees again. He tried to pull himself up, but his feet slid away and he lay in the pool of liquid, his chest heaving with the effort.

He swayed on his feet, feeling himself balance, beginning to understand how to judge his movements. He stood, trying not to move or to slip, and looked around. The room was large and bright. He knew it was a room: that was one of the many concepts that surfaced through the pool of memory. Wall lights and a huge chandelier illuminated the clean, polished surfaces. Wide wood-panelled pillars, like the one he had been born from, reached up to a high, vaulted ceiling. Smaller, more delicate pillars arched round the edge of the room. Through the windows beyond them he could see the stars. And he remembered the ship, remembered *Medusa*.

Round tables with chairs beside them were arranged around a central open area. A long rectangular table ran down one side – a bar, he recalled. A bar. As his eyes settled on it, focused his memory, the wall behind the bar split and opened. It slid away, revealing a dimly lit area. As he watched, two figures emerged, blinking into the light. Had they too just been born, been thrust into this world of half-memories and inconsistent voices clamouring to be heard within his head? Or had they arrived to help him, to explain the world?

The figures wore long white coats over their clothes. Names – he knew they were names – were stencilled on to each coat: ANDRENI and MACNEESON. There was no particular memory that surfaced in his consciousness, but he was afraid nonetheless and sank back to his knees in the slush. They were talking to each other, laughing and joking. He tried to call out, to speak. But his voice was a dead, dry



croak in his throat. They ignored him anyway, reached out together as if he were a thing, not a person. Each of them took one of his arms and they hauled him to his feet and dragged him back towards the bar.

Neither of them looked him in the face. Neither of them made eye contact. He let himself be dragged away, a dead weight, as his mind struggled to catch up with events.

What was happening? Where was he?

*Who* was he?

The area was dark by comparison with the brightly lit room he had just left. It took his eyes a while to adjust. As they dragged him, he focused on the points of light that they passed. Each point was an image, each a rectangular picture of a part of the ship. And although he had never seen any of them before, he recognized them all. A chandelier - he knew the name, the meaning somehow - reflected in a pool of black liquid in one of the images. He craned to keep it in sight - a still point of reference in the turning world. But they pulled him away.

One of the men, Andreni, let go of him for a second with one arm. Andreni reached out and touched a switch as they passed a bank of controls. At once the music of an old waltz drifted across the room, echoing from the speakers by the screens and through the open door into the ballroom. And he remembered dancing to the same music a lifetime ago.

Behind the lights, the screens, was another area. In the centre of it was a long low couch covered in dark shiny plastic. They lifted him up and on to the couch, laying him back along it so that he stared up at the high ceiling where it was lost in the darkness above him. A clatter by his side - a sound he recognized - and he twisted his head abruptly to see the source.

A scalpel rocked back and forth where it had shifted in the kidney-shaped steel bowl on the low table beside the couch. Above him a bright light, a set of four lights in a regular matrix, snapped on, blinding him. He stared up at the lights, stared so hard that dark dots appeared in the centre of each bulb and the brilliance stayed stamped on his eyelids, just as

bright, when he blinked. Then the brightness faded as something came down towards him out of the light.

It was an arm. The hand held an oval of clear plastic attached to a tube. A mask. The face looming behind the arm was wearing a mask as well - white, with no tube. A surgical mask.

Scalpel.

Bright lights.

Mask.

A realization - an amalgam of memories - clicked into place as he felt the other man pulling a strap tight across his chest and the mask touched his skin. His body arced backward, almost as a reflex, and he kicked with his feet and lashed out with his arms, his hands clawing and scratching at anything they met.

The tightness across his upper body gave way as his arm made contact with a hard object and sent it careering across the room. The shorter man, Macneeson, hit the wall, bounced off, and sat stunned on the floor. Then Macneeson was back on his feet and returning to the couch. But by now he had grabbed the other man - Andreni - with both hands, pulled his head down violently to connect painfully with his own. He had twisted off the couch, sending the steel tray spinning to the floor, his hand closing automatically around the thin metal handle of the scalpel.

Andreni came at him again and in desperation he pulled the scalpel free of the flying tray and slashed it in a low arc in front of him. Andreni had his head down, charged at him. Met the knife.

Macneeson was now diving across the couch with a shout, reaching for the hand holding the scalpel, grabbed it. They wrestled, each trying to pull the thin knife free from the other. They pulled apart and came together in time to the music - a grotesque parody of the waltz. Until one of the partners broke away, clutched at his chest, and collapsed - still clutching - to the floor.

He was standing again in a sticky, growing pool of dark viscous liquid. Again he was uncertain what to do. He swayed

on his feet, but this time it was from tiredness and exertion rather than from an innate lack of balance. Across the room the screens shone their images at him, beckoning him back to the world that he knew, that he half remembered - to *Medusa*. He hurled himself at the screens, and at the control panels beneath them. His husky screams echoed round the small room as he hammered again and again at the consoles until his hands were bloody and raw.

One by one the screens winked out as his ragged fists grazed their power controls. And after a while, it was dark and silent again in the room.

A weary naked figure dragged itself from the control room, its breath coming in ragged gasps as it sank to its knees just outside the door. Then the door swung shut, cutting off the light.

With a heavy click, the concealed door behind the bar swung open. The change in Taffeta Graize was marked. She was immediately on her feet. Even the generated similarity could not disguise the sudden fear and surprise as she pointed across at Benny and Stuart behind the bar.

'I'll find you,' she screamed at them. 'Wherever you are, I'll find you.' Before she finished shouting, she was striding across the dance floor towards them.

'After you,' Benny said hastily to Stuart. She was pretty certain that Graize was just a projection - an illusion no more real or dangerous than the apparitions they had seen throughout the trip. But she wasn't hanging around to be proved wrong.

Benny followed Stuart into a small, dark room. The only light came from the ballroom behind them, flickering over the threshold, and from the myriad stars along one wall. Then, as Benny stared at them, she realized that they were not stars at all, but tiny lights on a large instrument panel. Some of the lights disappeared into the blackness, then reappeared. It took her a moment to see that Stuart was already at the panel, that his body was blocking out, then revealing, lights again as he moved along.

‘Ah, this one, I think,’ she heard him murmur. Then the room lit up to reveal Stuart standing in front of a long bank of dusty screens. And Benny let out a short scream.

‘Sorry,’ she said almost immediately. She had looked round, and seen another small room beyond the one they were in. On the far wall, another door led away perhaps to further rooms. But it was the second room that had astonished Benny, brought the cry to her lips.

Like everything else on *Medusa* it was wreathed in cobwebs and deep in dust. A surgical couch was at an odd angle, as if it had been spun round. Above it illumination tried desperately to stream through the cobwebbed light, but had to settle for a dull glow. A tray of surgical instruments lay spilt on the grimy floor. And there were two bodies. Each lay in a faded, dried pool of its own blood. One was face down, a skeletal hand stretched out in front of it, clawing at the ground as if trying even now to crawl away. The other lay on its back, its eyes black staring sockets and its skull teeth clenched together in a broad grimace. One hand was clutching at its chest. The bone of the fingers clasped round the protruding hilt of a scalpel around which the stain spread over the figure’s grey, mildewed coat.

In the doorway, Taffeta Graize surveyed the rooms. ‘So this,’ she said, ‘is why the monitoring stopped.’

‘Looks pretty comprehensive to me,’ Benny said once she had got her breath back.

‘It was,’ Graize said.

‘I meant what happened here.’ She cocked her head to one side and smiled. ‘I guess your similarity doesn’t include this area, then. Just the things it was itself set up to monitor.’

Graize said nothing. She was watching Stuart. In that moment Benny realized two things. The first was that Graize - the real Graize - did indeed see things from the perspective of her simulated avatar. The second was that whether Stuart knew it or not, he was close to something that worried Graize. Worried her a lot.

‘What are you doing?’ Benny asked him.

‘Remembering,’ he said quietly. One by one the screens were flickering back into dusty life, showing aspects of the ship. ‘They could control the whole ship from here, you know, as well as see everything that happened.’

Graize snorted. ‘What a way to waste your last half-hour of life,’ she hissed. The synthetic smile was back on her face.

‘And what do you think we should be doing?’ Benny challenged her. ‘What are you afraid of?’

‘Nothing.’ But the answer was just too quick and offhand.

Benny ran to join Stuart at the controls. ‘They’re running the similarity of *Medusa* from the same monitoring systems,’ she said. ‘Somehow Chromsky keyed into them and it’s transmitting the data.’

‘So?’

‘So let’s shut it down.’ Benny grabbed his arm. ‘Let’s shut everything down. That way they’ll at least have to track us the good old-fashioned way.’

‘No!’ Graize was beside them, shimmering with anger. ‘You can’t escape me. You won’t escape me.’

‘Wanna bet?’ Stuart asked, already running his hands over the console, leaving finger trails in the dust as he sought out the right controls.

‘Worried?’ Benny asked sweetly. ‘But I was just going to suggest we have that Heisenberg chat now. You know, about how the act of observing something actually changes the thing you’re observing.’ Behind her, Stuart had found, the panel he was looking for. He ran his hands over the controls, his face creased with concentration. Then he turned and picked up one of the heavy metal operators’ chairs.

‘No...’ Graize cried out again, as Stuart brought the chair crashing down on the panel. As the chair connected, the panel exploded in a spectacular shower of sparks and flame.

The scream lingered in the dusty air, counterpointing the sound of the explosion, as Graize’s image guttered and died. And with it, the lights dimmed and faded to nothing.

Blackness.

‘Damn,’ said Benny into the night. ‘This may not help as much as I’d hoped.’

But then there was a faint hum and the room was lit up again. Blood-red light spilt from ceiling level as emergency lights cut in. Through the open doorway, Benny could see that the ballroom was also lit in the same eerie glow.

‘Oh, not so bad after all,’ she said with a grin.

‘They brought me in here,’ Stuart said, ‘after I was born.’ The red glow cast deep shadows across his face, giving him an almost satanic look. ‘They put me on the couch. They were...’ He broke off, as if the effort of remembering was too much. ‘I... I had to...’

Benny reached out, took his hand in hers. ‘It’s OK,’ she said. ‘You did what you had to.’

He turned to her, the shadows dancing on his face as he spoke. ‘I was born in the tank, in the pillar.’ His voice was flat, almost emotionless. ‘I know who I am now, Benny. I am everyone. I have their memories, their characters, their personalities.’ His voice cracked. ‘I am everyone but myself.’ The last word was a sob, and he collapsed into Benny’s astonished arms.

After a while, his body stopped shaking, and he pulled himself upright. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘No,’ Benny said. ‘No, don’t be sorry. Don’t apologize for what you are.’ And she realized she was crying too.

‘I am no one.’

‘No. Everyone is someone. Be yourself. Even if you were born out of the experiences of others, you can still be yourself. You have twenty years of *you* to build on.’

He sniffed loudly. ‘Twenty years of reading dictionaries and encyclopedias trying to find a definition of myself.’ He shook his head. ‘Perhaps I am Jackson Hart after all. I thought I was for a while - hoped I was, almost. You thought so too, I think.’

Benny nodded, said nothing.

‘I think his is my strongest emotion, the strongest memory of being within me. Maybe because he was an uncontrolled part of the experiment, or maybe because he had the strongest emotion and drive. Perhaps that is who I am.’

‘It’s all right, Stuart,’ Benny told him. She hugged him, rocked him, desperate for him to believe her. ‘Everything’s all right now.’

The voice was cold, metallic and loud. It echoed out of the gloom, devoid of emotion and oblivious to everything but the information it was imparting. ‘Main power systems now inoperative. Backup systems shut down. All available ancillary power now diverted to life-support units.’

‘Oh,’ Benny muttered, ‘good.’

‘Power loss has caused Final Fail-Safe to be activated to destroy all evidence of the Medusa Experiment. Main reactor coolant control no longer operational,’ the voice continued impassively. ‘Terminal overload will occur in fifty-eight minutes.’

‘I wonder what *terminal* means exactly,’ Benny said quietly after a few moments.

‘I take it,’ Stuart said, ‘that you don’t really want a definition.’

‘Terminal overload will occur in fifty-seven minutes, forty-five seconds,’ the computer voice obliged. ‘Complete destruction of *Medusa* is assured.’

‘I think I understand where we stand, thank you,’ Benny said.

‘So. What now?’ Stuart asked. ‘Graize’s ship will be here in about twenty minutes, from what she said.’

But before Benny could answer, the metallic voice cut in: ‘Terminal overload will occur in fifty-seven minutes, thirty seconds.’

‘I can’t cope with that every fifteen seconds,’ Benny said. ‘Where’s the volume control?’

‘There isn’t one.’ But Stuart was pulling open an inspection hatch. ‘Fortunately,’ he said, ‘I seem to remember some thing about how all this works. Maybe Kallis Shaw also knew more than he was letting on and I’m benefiting from that.’ He reached inside and drew out a junction box connected to several wires.

‘You would think,’ Benny said, ‘that if power is so desperately short, it wouldn’t waste it on a stupid message like that.’

‘Terminal overload will occur in fifty-seven minutes, fift-’ The voice cut out as Stuart ripped away one of the wires.

‘It probably doesn’t use much power,’ he said. ‘And there’s always a chance we could repair the systems.’

‘Could we?’ Benny asked hopefully.

They both looked at the charred black mess that had been the main console. ‘No,’ said Benny. ‘No, I guess not.’ They both stood for a while by the console. Then Benny put her hand on Stuart’s shoulder. ‘Come on,’ she said. ‘There’s no point hanging around here. It’s the first place they’ll come looking.’

‘Back to your cabin, then.’

‘Why?’

‘I want to know everything you can tell me, everything on your datadisc, about Jackson Hart. I may remember something that might help.’

‘Hmm.’ Benny wasn’t convinced. ‘Like where you left your bazooka and spare reactor cooling system, perhaps.’ But, since she had no better plan, they headed back towards her cabin.

They had been on their way for less than five minutes when Stuart collapsed. He made no sound, just slumped suddenly sideways into the wall of the corridor. His eyes glazed over, and Benny guessed he was having another flashback. His face contorted in pain and anguish as the unseen nightmare continued. Benny helped him to sit down on the floor - at least he could be comfortable. She held his hand as he stared beyond her into the past.

After what seemed forever, he blinked and his face relaxed. ‘I saw...’ he croaked. ‘Benny, I was Jackson Hart, just for a short while. And I saw -’ But, before he could tell her what he had seen, they were both distracted by the noise.

It came from behind them, from the direction they had come. It was the echoing, indistinct sound of tearing wood



and shattering glass. A distant roar of tortured materials being twisted and ripped apart.

‘What the hell is that?’

‘Graize’s ship?’ Benny asked.

‘Wrong direction. The docking bays are that way.’ He pointed in the opposite direction. ‘But we should be able to see from the main window in the ballroom if her ship is in sight yet.’

Benny followed him back down the corridor. She was not sure she wanted to head back towards the noise, whatever it was. But even as she thought this, the sounds stopped and all was silent again. And that frightened Benny more than the noise had done.

## CHAPTER 13

Benny and Stuart ran into the ballroom at full tilt, skidding on the wet floor. They cannoned into the side of the bar as they tried to stop at the edge of the dance floor. All around the polished wooden surface, now awash with debris and slime, the huge panelled pillars had been smashed apart. Only three remained intact.

Pulling themselves free of the shattered wood and glass, milling around the edge of the room in obvious confusion, were close to a dozen figures. As Benny watched, one of the last three pillars exploded outward in a shower of shards and splinters. A bulbous, rot-green arm reached out from inside, stubby slimy fingers clawing at the broken frame as the creature hauled itself out into the deep red light. Further along, another pillar was bulging under the strain, sections of the panelling falling away under repeated blows from within.

Suddenly the second pillar gave way, releasing a torrent of the thick dark liquid on to the dance floor, where it flooded across the room in a wave pushing forward the smaller pieces of wood and glass in its path. The creatures seemed not to notice, still wandering, dazed, knocking into each other as they stumbled about in the half-light.

They all looked very similar. Perhaps, Benny thought, they had been intended to look different, even to look like people. But they didn't.

'I think they just kept growing, in the tanks. For all those years,' Stuart said in a hushed whisper as they watched the creatures.

'Perhaps you screwed up their growth process,' Benny said, her voice just as quiet. From across the room the creatures were a moving mass of globules in the red of the emergency lighting. Their skins glistened, the limbs jutting out at

unlikely angles. Their whole frames were bulbous and swollen, and the flesh - if it was flesh - seemed to have been applied in huge lumps on to a thin wire frame. Like putrefying green putty. And they were dripping with the slimy liquid from their growth tanks.

One of the synthetic creatures staggered across the dance floor towards them, its enlarged feet slapping into the viscous liquid. As it approached, it raised the swollen mass of slime that was its head. The eyes were sunken holes above a vast pustule of a nose. The cheeks were distended flaps of grey. There was no hair, and the ears were shallow depressions in the globules that burst out from the side of the head. Two bulges below the nose moved apart with a sucking sound, revealing a dark slit behind them, and Benny realized the creature was trying to talk.

‘Any,’ the creature seemed to be saying. Its voice was throaty and sore.

‘Any...’ A huge arm reached out towards them as it staggered onwards. ‘Any... Elp-ssss.’

It repeated the sounds over and over as it shuffled through the liquid. With each desperate step, the sounds became slightly more articulate, more distinct, until Benny felt the blood drain from her face even before she realized she had understood what the creature was trying to say.

‘How?’ Stuart asked, his voice sounded dry, nervous. ‘How does it know your name?’

‘It remembers me,’ Benny said. She stared at the horrendous, malformed thing that reached out to her. ‘Oh my God, it has their memories. Our memories.’ She turned away. ‘I want to be sick,’ she said. But her last word was lost as she screamed.

With a tearing, wrenching shriek of twisted wood, the pillar behind Benny and Stuart flew apart. Glass whipped at their faces and splinters rained down as the rush of liquid washed over their feet and the creature within fell out into the room with a nauseating squelch.

‘Benny,’ the creature crossing the dance floor said again. ‘Benny, help us. Don’t you recognize us? What has happened to you?’

‘To me?’ She almost laughed, except she was too busy trying to work her way round the newborn that was struggling to its feet. ‘Who the hell do you think you are?’

The creature paused. Perhaps its expression changed, but it was impossible to tell. ‘I -’ it started. ‘I -’ It looked down at itself, as if to check. Then it swung slowly round, looked back at the other creatures that were already wading after it - after Benny and Stuart. ‘I am Kallis Shaw,’ it said. ‘And Heath Chromsky.’ A step more. ‘And I am Martia Lupis and Helena Gyles.’

The others were staggering after it now, towards Benny and Stuart as they backed away.

‘We are Rawling Hoyt and Miles Betton,’ one of the other creatures hissed. It was impossible to tell which. ‘And Vasco Playdon and Dorian Phelps.’

Benny wanted to run, but it was an effort just to back slowly away along the side of the bar.

‘We are Bettyana and Andrea,’ another voice now, slightly softer but still a painful rasp. ‘And Forsyth Kerven and Rathbone Quarrel, and Anni Goranson.’

A hand clamped down on Benny’s shoulder, and at last she turned to run. But it was not Stuart’s hand. It was the dripping, misshapen claw of the creature from the last pillar. Its breath was oily and putrid as it gasped: ‘And we are you, Bernice Summerfield. Never forget us. We are you.’

Then the creature let go of her shoulder as Stuart barged it aside. He grabbed Benny’s hand and dragged her away. She scooped a bottle from the bar as they ran, skidded, their way out of the room. Vodka - it would do.

‘Maybe they’re harmless,’ Stuart said as they ran. ‘Maybe they just look revolting.’

‘Then why are we running?’

‘Do we need a reason?’

'No,' Benny admitted. 'But here's one anyway. Taffeta Graize said she could control those synthetic creatures. Even if they're harmless now, they won't be for long.'

As they kept running, two things stuck in Benny's memory. The first was the creatures' voices echoing inside her head. 'Help us, Benny. Help us - we are you. We remember everything you know.' The second was the sleek, dark shape of a long-range scout ship she had seen through the huge picture window in the ballroom. It was manoeuvring for docking.

The man with the broken face who opened the door and stepped from the airlock into the corridor was carrying a small attaché case. He set it down carefully on the floor, then closed the door. The emergency lighting made the scar across his chin seem to glow white against his red skin, just as it emphasized the darkrimbs to his deep-set eyes. His short red hair burnt on his head.

'They should be here in a few minutes,' Taffeta Graize said. 'It will take them a while to get orientated, to adjust to their new world - their new lives. But the implants are all showing positive, so the impulse to come to us here and accept our orders is strong.'

'Stronger than any other memories they might have?' Styrys Kirk asked, his voice a dry throaty rasp that echoed in the dusty corridor.

Graize nodded. 'They are formed from general impressions, traits and emotions rather than actual memories. There may be some traces, some rogue personality within their individual make-up, but nothing serious.' She smiled. 'The readings from their implants show they are every bit as malleable and impressionable as we had hoped and planned.'

As she finished speaking, the first of the creatures shuffled into sight at the end of the corridor. Behind it, the others crowded into sight, making their slow silent way towards the airlock.

'The readings were right,' Kirk said. 'The growth process has continued unchecked.' His shattered nose wrinkled

slightly as he watched the grotesque creatures shamble towards them down the corridor. 'Do we just take them on board and leave?'

Graize shook her head. 'They can help us solve our little problem with Summerfield and this Stuart character. It will be a good test, don't you think?'

'Indeed.' Kirk's eyes glinted with sudden malice in the half-light. 'It'll be useful to see what the synths can really do.' He watched the shambling creatures as they edged closer. 'What about the control creature?'

The synths had almost reached them. We must assume it died before it was born. We had no way of manipulating its thoughts or actions in any case, so it is irrelevant.' Graize turned, and opened her arms in a gesture of welcome, of affection. Her eyes glistened as she greeted them. 'There you are at last,' she said, her voice low and soft. 'My children.'

The standard half-bottle of vodka fitted neatly into Benny's jacket pocket. It occurred to her that this should not really be a surprise, as it was one of the reasons she had bought the jacket in the first place. 'We need to get off this ship,' she said.

Stuart nodded. 'Before it blows itself up. There aren't many choices, are there?'

'No.' Benny sat down on the sofa. They were in the officers' mess - it had seemed as good a place as any to head for. At least it was clean. 'No, there aren't. What about the lifeboats?'

Stuart shook his head. 'Short-range and no steering. They're just space rafts, really. Graize would see us launch and just come and pick us up.'

Benny thought about this. 'OK,' she said, 'then let's give them a few minutes to come looking for us, then nip round behind them and nick the scout ship.'

'Simple as that?'

'Hey, you never know.' But she doubted it. 'In the meantime, how about you tell me what you know that might help.'

‘Meaning that I’m one of them after all, so I know all about it?’ The resentment and disappointment was dripping off his words.

Benny leant forward, elbows on her knees, and looked him in the eye. ‘Meaning,’ she said, ‘that you had another flash back just before we met our blobby alter egos back there. I was just wondering if it was something useful or important.’ She leant back in the sofa. ‘Or at least interesting.’

Stuart held up his hands in a gesture of peace. ‘OK, OK. I’m sorry. He sat down beside her, and she could feel the tension in his body transmitted through the upholstery as much as it was evident in his bearing. ‘I was Jackson Hart,’ he said slowly. ‘Just for a while, I was Jackson Hart.’ He turned to Benny, and his eyes were moist with inner sadness. ‘I didn’t kill them, you know. I really didn’t.’ He shook his head, looked away, bit his lip. ‘The whole team, dead.’ He buried his face in his hands. ‘Oh God, they’re all dead. Every one of them. Except me.’

Benny put her hand on his shoulder. ‘Tell me what happened,’ she said.

‘It was like it happened last week or last month. And it was like it happened to me. For a while, a short while, I actually was Jackson Hart. It wasn’t a memory that had sneaked in, or a hallucination. It was real, and I was there.

‘The whole team was working that evening. The end was in sight - we could actually believe we were going to finish the work. I don’t recall the details of what we were doing, or why we thought we were doing it. But I’m sure that we - that I - had no inkling that we were working on the project that Taffeta Graize described. We had finished the remote-control systems in the first month. That was never a focus. Now we were working for the greater good, for humanity and all lifekind. We were the beacon of sanity and progress in the midst of war and destruction.

‘There was an atmosphere which went with that, which went with the sense of impending achievement and of immense contribution. There was a team spirit and feeling of

purpose that transcended the fact that it was a job of work. It wasn't just another project: it was Important, possibly Vital. And we were nearing the end, and it felt good. It felt terrific.

'Only Cragton wasn't euphoric. He was a single note of discord in our harmony of purpose. He went from desk to desk, from work station to work station, muttering in hushed tones as if he thought he might be overheard by someone from outside our elite group. Perhaps he was right. I don't know how many of us he muttered his message to, probably everyone.

'He wanted a meeting. He wanted everyone gathered in the lab that evening, so that he could tell us whatever it was he had to tell us. It was as if he felt that confiding in us one at a time just was not good enough, that somehow we all needed to know together, to achieve an immediate critical mass. But he gave no clues as to what it was he wanted to say. And since we all knew we'd be there working that evening anyway, I guess we all agreed.

'But we weren't all there that evening, as it turned out. Graize was away, attending some social soiree. She did that a lot, to get us the funding and keep the project a focus of attention and interest so we didn't get cut. That's what she said, and we none of us were envious of the task of bowing and scraping to the academic and industrial sponsors and accepting their hospitality and wine.

'And I wasn't there either. I think, to be honest, we had all forgotten about Cragton's meeting. The afternoon, when he wandered among us whispering surreptitiously, seemed a lifetime ago. A lifetime. I was over in the cyclotronic unit collecting some genetic samples that Graize needed for when she got back the next morning.

'I waited what seemed like forever for an elevator back up to the lab. None of them seemed to be moving. It came out during the trial that they had been disabled, presumably so the killer would not be disturbed - so I would not be disturbed - and so that nobody could escape. I gave up waiting eventually, and took the service stairs. I went slowly, careful not to drop the heavy specimen case I was carrying. I



had no idea what the genetic material was for. According to the label on the case, which I read as I climbed the stairs, it was nascent DNA strands that could be grown over a biodegradable framework of some sort. Ironical now to think that all those years ago, I was in fact carrying a form of myself.

The door at the top of the stairs opened into the stairwell and it was on a heavy spring. It was tricky to balance the specimen case, lean over the reader so it could scan my retina pattern, and then pull the door open towards me. I pulled it open a crack, then shoved my foot behind it to stop it swinging shut again while I got a better grip. Through the gap between door and frame, I heard an uproar. Everyone seemed to be talking - shouting even. I could hear the cries of colleagues who rarely raised their voices above a conversational level as they shouted and screamed at each other.

I caught odd snatches as I struggled with the door. But the stairwell was a long way from the area where everyone had gathered to listen to Cragton, hidden away in an unlit corner of the lab behind the backup systems.

"I say we stop now, demand an explanation."

"Let's take a vote on it."

"They can't get away with this."

"Where's Graize, what's she got to say?"

"Does she know?"

"This is contrary to everything we've worked for."

Then Cragton's voice, calmer and quieter than the others. But they stopped to hear him. "They won't let us stop them now. I've thought this through. They've come too close and they're too powerful. Too many promises have been made and too much money exchanged already."

"So what do we do?"

"What *can* we do?"

Cragton again: "We can destroy everything we've achieved so far. All the notes, all the samples, all the documentation."

There was a hubbub again. I guess I must have paused in the doorway as the enormity of what I was hearing struck

home. I was walking towards the group of people when the noise stopped. I must have put down the sample case somewhere, certainly I no longer had it in my hands. I could see the team through the glass partition. They turned as one to face the main door, and I guessed someone had come in. But I couldn't see who.

Then the shooting started. There's nothing as distinctive as the sound of a blaster going off on a wide-beam setting. But the characteristic sizzle took longer to register in my brain than the sight of its effects. I saw Frimptin and Laine thrown backward across the lab, heard the sound of breaking glass as they landed on a workbench. A terminal smashed to the floor as Karlsen was knocked into it. Then Jardley's body hit the partition hard enough to craze it. The glass bulged outward at me, sagged as his body fell away. The cracks were so dense that I couldn't see through it any more.

For a moment I was frozen, rooted to the spot. Then I ran towards the sound, towards the bodies, towards the sudden stench and heat.

I was too late of course. They were all dead, lying where they'd fallen. Some of them were recognizable, but a high-impact blaster even on a wide beam leaves little intact of the flesh it touches. Serious weaponry, even during a war. I just stopped and stared. That's what saved me. If I'd run in, made any sudden movement, the killer would have seen me. But he didn't. He just turned and walked away. I watched him go, saw him head for the other stairwell, saw him drop the blaster from his gloved hand as he went.

I was numb, in shock. I stood there for a while, God knows for how long. When they found me I was kneeling on the floor by the fallen blaster. Sobbing. They never believed my story. It was exactly what the criminal would say if caught red-handed, after all.

There was no chance for me to argue my innocence after that. At the trial I never even bothered to try. I knew I could - I would - escape and prove my innocence one day. And that knowledge that it wasn't me, that I was in the frame whether by accident or design, that drive and depth of feeling and

emotion is what kept me - kept Hart - going. And I think it's why Jackson Hart is now so prominent in my memories, so dominant in my personality.'

When Stuart had finished his story, they sat in silence for a while. Then Benny got to her feet, and held out her hand to him. He took it, although he needed no help, and got up from the couch.

'Come on,' Benny said. 'They should be well on their way to the ballroom by now. I imagine they'll want to repair things and get their similarity working again so they can find us.'

'If they can,' Stuart said with a grin. 'I think it may be beyond salvation.'

'I agree. But just in case, let's get moving.'

They made their way cautiously through the ship. It was even more eerie in the red half-light. The cobwebs were hardly visible, but they caught in Benny's hair and face as she pushed through them, suppressing the urge to call out in surprise and annoyance. And fear. Around any corner, in any shadow, one of the grotesque, synthetic creatures might be lurking, waiting for them. Stuart led the way, taking a long route well away from the main thoroughfares and the ballroom. Before long, they began to tread more easily, and even to converse in tense, quiet whispers as they went.

They arrived in the casino area without incident, and Benny was almost ready to believe that they would make it to Graize's ship. Perhaps there would be a crew to deal with, or maybe only a pilot left in charge. Her hope was that Graize was playing things so close that she had brought just a small team with her. With luck, most, if not all, of them would now be scouring the ship for her and Stuart or trying to repair the damaged systems.

The corridor looked empty. They crept cautiously along it, every step an effort both to keep silent and to contain their excitement and anticipation. The airlock door was mere feet away, just a few paces. The section of the corridor was reassuringly familiar – the oak panelling, the cobwebs pulled

aside from the painting of the girl with the butterfly, the glass porthole in the airlock door.

That last few metres seemed to take longer than the rest of the journey. Stuart stood outside the door, looking round warily. Benny was by the door. The porthole was high up, and she had to stand on tiptoe to get a good view into the docking area beyond. The scene was a vista of dust, and she rubbed at it with her cuff, smearing a hole in the dirt. Then she leant forward again and looked through.

‘It’s there,’ she hissed. ‘Graize’s ship. Looks like it’s all set to leave as soon as they get back on board.’

‘Anyone in it? Can you see the cockpit?’

Benny leant even closer to the glass, her nose practically touching the cold surface as her breath misted it slightly. She could see no movement at all. The cockpit was in plain sight. And it was empty.

She was about to turn away, her face a broad grin of relief and victory. She was about to hug Stuart, to tell him they were away and free. She was about to punch the access codes into the reader by the door.

But before she could do any of these, the scene through the airlock porthole changed. A grey shape rose into sight, as if surfacing from below a dark viscous liquid. Its deep-set eyes stared piercingly at Benny through the thick glass. The distortion made its blotched, pustulous features even more bizarre and horrific as a slash appeared in the twisted face and black teeth grinned back at her. Then the glass misted over abruptly as she gasped and jumped backward.

‘It’s always even more of a disappointment when you’re let down at the last possible moment, don’t you think?’ Graize’s voice was edged with malicious amusement as she stood, hands on hips at the end of the corridor. Beside her, dressed bizarrely in a dark business suit and holding an attache case, was a large man with short hair that appeared violently red in the emergency lighting. And behind them swarmed the creatures, their features distorted still further by anticipation and bloodlust.

Graize snapped her fingers. The sound was like a pistol shot in the narrow passageway. At once the creatures pushed past her, seemed almost to push through her in their eagerness. As Benny and Stuart backed away, the airlock door hissed open and the creature that had leered at Benny leapt out and landed at her feet, crouching ready to attack. 'Bernice Summerfield,' it spat, 'I know you.' Its mouth broke open again so that the black teeth glinted in the red light. 'I *am* you.' And for a split second Benny could see just the faintest resemblance in the angle it held its head, in the depth of the eyes.

Then Stuart stepped forward and kicked the creature full in the face. It fell backward with a hoarse cry. 'I know you too,' it gasped. 'You're one of us. Help us.' It reached out from its curled foetal position on the floor, clawed at one of Benny's feet as she stepped backward.

For a split second Benny considered trying to jump over the creature into the airlock. But the others were crowding round it now, and the moment was gone. She turned and ran down the corridor, Stuart close on her heels as they headed towards the casino. Behind them she could hear the thump of the creatures' monstrously deformed feet as they pounded after them.

At first it seemed as though it would not be difficult to evade the lumbering monsters. They were much slower than Benny and Stuart, and even if they never tired they would still be at a disadvantage. Benny wondered briefly if Stuart's knowledge of *Medusa* would be of help, but dismissed the thought. They could not rely on that - between them the synthetic creatures had the combined knowledge of both crews and of Stuart himself.

'So much for Plan A,' Benny gasped as they ran. 'How long have we got?'

'I would guess about thirty minutes. But there's no way to be sure.'

'Great.'

'So what's Plan B?' Stuart asked as together they leapt the steps into the casino.

Benny skidded to a halt. 'Just as defunct,' she said. In front of them four of the creatures were arranged across the room, waiting. She turned to retrace her steps. But already she could hear the other creatures down the corridor.

'Plan C?' Stuart suggested quietly. They edged their way across the room. The creatures closed in, driving them towards a corner. There were no doors in the corner, no way of escape.

The first of the pursuing creatures emerged into the room. It stumbled up the short flight of steps from the corridor and ambled over to join its fellows as they closed in. The ranks of the monstrous creations swelled as more of them arrived. Soon there was a wall of pustulating, bulbous flesh heaving towards Benny and Stuart as they backed slowly away.

'You really shouldn't be so predictable.' Graize's voice floated across the room, seeming to come from the very air itself. 'It takes all the fun out of it, wouldn't you say, Mr Kirk?'

'Indeed.' The man's voice was a painful rasp. He stood behind the synths, still holding the attaché case in his left hand.

'You seem to be enjoying this,' Benny commented, as much for something to say as anything else.

'Oh yes.' It was the man who replied. A scar stood out proud and white on his chin in the red glow. 'Consider it a debt repaid.'

Stuart was looking round desperately for some means of escape. Benny frowned.

'What are you on about?' she asked. 'What debt?'

It was Graize who answered. 'You had a hand in the death of a colleague of his. A friend, or as close as Styru Kirk has.'

'I find that hard to believe,' Benny snapped back, wondering if she could draw them into a long conversation while she and Stuart figured out a daring and improbable escape plan. 'I doubt if I move in the same rarified social circles as your Mr Kirk does.'

‘Jarl Kedrick.’ The name was a scraping hiss from Kirk, his face contorted with the effort of saying the name. ‘You killed Jarl Kedrick.’

‘Ah.’ Benny smiled, a nervous smile but a smile nonetheless. ‘That figures. You must have got on well together. But I can’t take all the credit, you know. Director Silvera made me an offer I could hardly refuse. He’d have killed Kedrick anyway.’ She took another step backward, felt something uneven under her foot, and heard a crack as it broke. ‘What’s that?’ she asked Stuart in a low voice, careful not to move.

‘You’re standing in my chest,’ he replied calmly.

She looked down. The body of Jackson Hart was lying beneath her, his skull face staring up to meet her gaze. Her foot was stuck through his tunic, and a broken rib protruded close to her ankle. ‘Sorry,’ she said quickly, without thinking who she was talking to. Then she carefully extracted her foot. It caught on the tunic, pulling it up and away from the skeleton within. The rotted fabric tore and split.

‘Plan C,’ Stuart hissed. ‘There’s a gun in my pocket.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ Benny stared at him amazed. Then she followed his line of sight, and looked back at the body. Sure enough, from the torn pocket of the tunic, the barrel of an old-fashioned percussion pistol was jutting. ‘Got it.’ Benny grinned, stooped down and grabbed the gun. It pulled free easily. In one movement she raised it, aimed and fired.

The creatures halted their approach at the sound. Several of them actually staggered backward, although the shots had not been aimed at them. Three shots in rapid succession. Every one was on target. Benny stood, legs apart, leaning into the recoil as she held the pistol firmly in both hands and fired at Taffeta Graize.

She had a direct line of sight to the woman. She knew the shots were going true, felt they were good even before the bullets hit. Benny was one hundred per cent certain that all three bullets would cluster in Taffeta Graize’s chest. Dead cert.

Except that they missed. The gun was loaded, and with real shells. Benny could tell from the recoil that they weren't blanks or dummies. The shots were right on target. She could tell that both from experience and from the fact that the wood panelling exploded from the wall immediately behind where Graize was standing. But the woman just laughed, threw her head back and laughed long and hard. The sound echoed round the room like an aftershock of the gunfire. It seemed to come from everywhere at once.

'You really think I'd waste my valuable time coming here in person?' Graize said between her peals of laughter. 'You think you're worth that much?'

Benny looked again at Graize. She saw the muzzy edge to her image now, realized why her voice seemed to come from all around. She saw the faintest shimmer in her white-blonde hair where the similarity was unable to sustain the fidelity of each strand falling across her shoulders. And she saw the care with which Styurus Kirk carried the attaché case.

'So much for Plan C,' Stuart said. 'What's Plan D?'

'I think we're running out of alphabet,' Benny replied.

'That,' Styurus Kirk said, 'is the least of your worries.' He stepped forward, waving the creatures onward as Benny and Stuart backed away again. He was careful to keep the creatures between himself and Benny. Between himself and the gun.

Benny fired at the nearest of the creatures. The gun clicked pathetically, jammed now with dirt and lack of use. It was a wonder, Benny admitted to herself, that it had worked at all without some attention. She hurled it at the monstrous figure instead. The creature batted it away, undeterred. 'I was with you when you did the deal with Santos Silvera, when you accepted Kedrick's life on a platter,' it croaked. 'I *was* you when you did the deal.'

The image of Graize leant against the shattered panelling and watched as the creatures closed in for the kill. Styurus Kirk followed close behind them, licking his thin lips in anticipation. As he stepped forward, he came directly into the illumination of one of the emergency lights.



Stuart stared at Kirk, as if seeing him properly for the first time. His lips curled into a sudden snarl. 'It was you.' Stuart's voice was barely more than a whisper. 'It was you,' he said again, his voice louder now, angry. Furious. 'You murderer,' he screamed as he launched himself at Kirk, ploughed into the wall of grey, grotesque creatures.

I just stopped and stared. That's what saved me. If I'd run in, made any sudden movement, the killer would have seen me. But he didn't. He just turned and walked away. I watched him go, saw him head for the other stairwell, saw him drop the blaster from his gloved hand as he went.

As he reached the door to the stairs, he turned and looked back, and nodded. It was like he was surveying his work, and finding it good. The light from the emergency exit sign above the door fell full on him in that moment. I saw him clearly, and I will never forget that face.

*He had blood-red hair, cut very short. His nose was crooked and broken and his eyes were sunken holes in his face. A long thin scar ran from the corner of his mouth down the side of his chin almost to the neck.*

The creatures caught Stuart as he dived into them. They held him between them, his arms out so that he was spread-eagled against them as he struggled to break through, to get to Kirk.

'Murderer,' he screamed again. 'You killed them, you killed them all.' Then he seemed to realize that he was struggling to no avail, and relaxed a little. 'Why?' His voice was quieter, more controlled, almost pleading for an answer. 'Why did you do it?'

Kirk looked across at Graize. She nodded, a slight incline of the head.

'Because,' Kirk said, 'Miss Graize told me to.'

'You? But it was your project. They were your team.'

'They were getting too clever for my own good,' Graize said calmly. 'Cragton was the problem. Somehow he discovered the real purpose of the work, who our sponsors really were.'

'You mean they objected to creating genetically engineered, aggressive military types rather than philosophers?' Benny asked.

'Something of the sort. They were weak. Despite their collective brilliance, they never appreciated the real value of their work.'

Stuart was shaking his head. The rest of him seemed to have gone limp, to have ceased trying to break free of the grip of the creatures. 'Dellah was neutral,' he said. We valued that. We valued the freedom to work to the greater good of lifekind, especially when there was a war raging around us. To be the eye of sanity in a storm of blood and senseless killing was an opportunity we none of us wanted to squander.'

Kirk laughed, a thin throaty cough. 'You talk as if you were there.'

'I was,' Stuart spat back. 'God help me, I was there.'

Something clicked in Benny's brain. 'What about Maryann Declleiter?' she asked. 'Did she really have an accident?'

'Oh yes.' Graize's voice was like honey with the bees still in it. 'Mr Kirk arranged a very genuine accident for dear Maryann.'

Kirk was grinning. The way it stretched his mouth made the scar stand out even more prominently across his chin. 'She was another one who asked too many questions.'

'Occupational hazard for a scientist, I'd have thought,' Benny retorted.

'Not when you start getting the answers she was.'

'I guess not,' Benny sneered. 'After all, what's another death?'

Kirk was still grinning. 'What's another two?' He gestured to the creatures holding Stuart, a flick of the head. They hurled Stuart away from them, straight at Benny. She caught him the best she could, reeling under the sudden weight. Then her feet tangled in Hart's corpse, bones breaking apart under them, and Benny and Stuart both fell to the ground in a tangle of limbs.

'Time to finish this, I think.' Graize's voice came from everywhere, surround-sound.

Benny stared up through a gap left between Stuart's arms and legs. The monstrous creatures were above them now, reaching down towards them. Their stubby, glutinous fingers clawed and slapped together, dark liquid dripping from their fingertips as their hideous misshapen forms blotted out the red light.

## CHAPTER 14

'Murderer,' Stuart shouted as they struggled on the floor. 'You murderer.'

Benny thought at first that there was an echo, that Stuart's voice was rebounding from the oak panelling or rattling round inside her skull. But as the hideous face of one of the synths brushed horrifyingly close to her own, she saw that its grey lips were moving slightly and felt the rancid breath on her cheek.

'Murderer,' the synth whispered. 'You murderer.'

Stuart was struggling violently, thrashing his arms about as he shouted at Kirk. And as Benny also tried to get free, she saw that several of the synths were also waving their arms, their movements mirroring Stuart's. In a moment, they were all doing it.

Stuart stood, shaking with anger, his hands clutching into fists at his sides. Slowly, as if still moving through the heavy thickness of the liquid that had nurtured them so long in their growth tanks, the synths also turned towards Kirk. Glutinous fingers bunched into their bulbous palms in time to Stuart's movements. The whispers were now a chorus: 'Murderer. You murderer. It was you. You killed them, killed them all.'

Benny struggled to her feet, shaking herself free of pieces of Hart's shattered remains, trying not to think about it. Her hand brushed against the hard shape of the vodka bottle in her pocket and she gave thanks it had not broken. Graize remained unruffled, but Kirk was backing slowly away as Stuart and the synths took a step towards him. Unison. The strength of a single emotive memory dictating the actions that drove them all forward. Hart's anger and rage controlled them all, overriding any other response.

‘Stop,’ Kirk said, his voice a desperate hiss. ‘Not me, them! Attack them!’

Benny said nothing, not wanting to break the spell. Any mitigation of the depth of the response from Hart - from Hart’s remembered persona - and the synths would again be under the control of Kirk and Graize. But for the moment they moved forward with Stuart, forcing Kirk back towards the billiards table.

When he reached it, backed into it, Kirk flinched. Perhaps he thought that one of them had somehow got behind him. ‘That’s far enough.’ His face betrayed the authority that his voice almost conveyed. ‘Return to your programmed task.’ The synths were almost on him now, lumbering forward with an

obscene  
squelching sound, reaching out for Kirk’s throat. ‘Kill him!’ Kirk’s voice was as loud as his damaged vocal cords would allow, hoarse and raw. His face was contorted with anger and pain as he pointed at Stuart.

They ignored him. A grey hand sucked at Kirk’s throat. Then another. Then Stuart’s hands closed around Kirk’s neck and his face creased with the effort as he squeezed. And as he squeezed, a faint smile came to his face. At last, after all these years, Jackson Hart would be avenged.

It was not much of a shift of emphasis. But it was enough. The slight diminution of emotion as Stuart allowed himself a feeling of relief and release was sufficient to drop below the threshold of Graize’s control of the synths. Even as he smiled, the synths that were holding Kirk seemed to lose their strength. Their arms fell to their sides, their heads bowed.

‘Stuart,’ Benny called out. ‘Stuart, look out. You’re losing them.’

He turned in response to her shout, and his grip loosened slightly on Kirk’s throat. Kirk broke free, pushing Stuart backward through the row of synths. The creatures turned to follow Stuart’s path, lifting their swollen heads and watching him with their deep-set eyes.

Benny grabbed Stuart under the arms, hauling him back to his feet as he fell. 'Time to leave,' she said as she dragged him towards the door. Ideally, they could have made a dash for the docking bay and tried to get to Kirk's ship. But Kirk was already cutting off that route. They were forced to head for one of the other doors from the casino.

The synths turned in unison to watch them go, still confused, it seemed, from Hart's overriding emotional response to seeing Kirk. But Benny knew it would not take Graize and Kirk long to re-establish their control and send the creatures in pursuit. Somehow they needed to double back to the ship.

'How long?' Benny asked after they had run for what seemed like several minutes with no sight or sound of pursuers.

Stuart didn't need to ask what she meant. 'About twenty minutes,' he said as they ran down the passageway. 'After that, our worries are over.'

'Let's try to find a less drastic solution then, shall we?'

'Plan Z?' Stuart asked as they ducked into a room.

Benny looked round the room they were now in. Everywhere looked much the same now, suffused with the red glow. But this room was markedly different from any other that Benny had seen so far. It was a gift shop.

Around the edges of the room were glass-topped counters. They also served as display cases, holding all manner of bizarre and hideous novelty gifts. All of them were coated with dust, which, together with the emergency lighting, had the distinctly beneficial effect of masking the true garish colours of some of the merchandise.

'I think Plan Z just took a turn for the worse,' Benny said as she brushed the dust from a counter top and peered in at the packaged bath salts, perfume atomizers and art nouveau depilatory devices within. Each was marked with a Medusa emblem - a woman's smiling face, her hair a mass of writhing snakes.

'Oh, I don't know.' Stuart was talking quietly. They had shut the door to the corridor, and taken so many random

turns that Benny doubted if the creatures would be able to follow them. Fortunately, a couple of the corridors had been well trodden and the dust was already churned up. But Stuart was obviously taking no chances. He was standing at another of the display counters, pointing at something inside.

‘What is it?’ Benny wandered over to join him.

‘Well, incredible as it may sound, it’s a gun.’

‘What?’ She quickened her pace, and stared down into the cabinet. It seemed to contain an assortment of metal objects – a boat, an ashtray with a figure of a woman poised on the edge about to dive into it, what looked like a model of *Medusa* itself... And in the middle of the display was a small, old-fashioned automatic pistol. ‘What the hell is that doing in there?’ Benny asked, amazed.

‘Who cares? Let’s get it out.’ He pulled his sleeve down and wrapped it over his fist, preparing to punch through the glass top of the case.

‘Wait.’ Benny grabbed his arm on the upswing. ‘That’ll make too much noise.’ She hunted round the edge of the cabinet. ‘There must be a way of opening this to get the things out.’ Sure enough, there was a small lock on the top edge. If she could pick the lock, she could swing the top of the counter up and reach inside for the gun. ‘I don’t suppose you’ve got a small piece of wire about your person.’ Stuart shook his head. ‘Thought not. Hair grip? Hat pin?’

‘Maybe there’s something in one of the other cases.’

Benny stopped looking at the lock and looked at Stuart. ‘You’re suggesting we smash another one open to get something to enable us to open this one without smashing it?’

He shrugged. ‘I wasn’t suggesting anything.’

‘Good.’ Benny pulled her sleeve down and wrapped it over her fist. Then she punched at the top of the case with all her strength. Her main worry was that she would break her knuckles and not the glass. But the casing was brittle, and collapsed into the cabinet with surprisingly little noise. Benny had pulled her arm out again before she realized that the greater danger had actually been from wrenching free of

the jagged edges rather than making the entry hole in the first place. But luckily the whole of the top had disintegrated into shards of glass. She looked round at Stuart and grinned as he raised an eyebrow. Then she pulled out the gun, and knew immediately that it was all wrong.

The weight, the balance, even the size of the pistol felt odd. It wasn't balanced for firing - the handle was too heavy. And the centre of gravity shifted slightly when she moved it. She pointed the pistol at a blank spot on the wall and applied first pressure to the trigger. That felt wrong as well - too much give.

'Now we have a weapon,' Stuart was saying, 'we can double back to the docking bay. It's sure to be guarded now, but maybe we can fight our way through.'

'With this?' Benny asked. The truth had just dawned on her.

'Why not?'

She didn't answer. Instead she held the gun out so that Stuart could see it, and squeezed the trigger. There was a dull metallic click, and a small flame appeared out of the end of the barrel, flickering blue against the red background light. Benny's shadow danced on the wall where she had been aiming the gun. She released the trigger and the lighter's flame died immediately.

'Right, let's go,' Benny said and strode across to the first cabinet she had examined. 'Just help me get into this case and grab some perfume, will you?'

Once it became clear that they had lost Benny and Stuart, Taffeta Graize and Styru Kirk discussed what to do next.

'We could just take the creatures and leave,' Kirk pointed out. 'Destroy *Medusa* before she gets within close range of Dellah.'

Graize was not convinced. 'That would attract attention. Too many people know *Medusa* is returning. What do you suppose the odds are of the ship actually meeting with a catastrophic accident or failure this close to Dellah after such a trip?'



‘You’re not convinced?’

Graize snorted. ‘Would you be?’

Kirk did not answer. ‘What do you suggest?’ he asked instead.

‘I suggest,’ Graize told him, ‘that you get the main power systems on line again. Then we can determine exactly where they are and go and get them.’

Kirk nodded. That made sense. ‘Might take a while,’ he mused.

Graize smiled. ‘That doesn’t matter. You’re days out from Dellah still. And they’re not going anywhere in the meantime.’ Their shadows stretched out in front of them, an early warning of their approach. There was nothing they could do about it. Stuart and Benny moved slowly and cautiously, ready to turn and run at the slightest sound. They had a couple of false alarms, but even so they had managed to make their way back almost to the docking bay without encountering any of the creatures. Benny carried the cigarette-lighter gun in one hand, an atomizer of particularly unpleasant-smelling perfume in the other. Twenty years of fermentation had not helped the pungent aroma that had perhaps been all the rage on the frontier worlds two decades ago.

They had emerged into the passageway halfway along, through a storeroom and a small galley area. The door opened within sight of the airlock, and Benny peered carefully through a crack between door and frame. Sure enough, one of the synthetic creatures was standing outside the airlock. Or, rather, it was slouching, its head down and arms hanging limp by its sides.

Benny moved to let Stuart see the situation. ‘Suggestions?’

‘One of us could draw it off and let the other get the door open. There are suits inside the airlock, if we can get to them.’

‘It would have to be pretty dumb to fall for that one,’ Benny observed. ‘Would you?’

Stuart did not need to consider for long. ‘No,’ he said.

‘Nor would I. And given that thing is two parts you and me, I doubt that it will either.’

‘And your suggestion?’

Benny smiled. ‘I ask him politely to move along.’

Stuart looked at her, bit his lower lip. ‘OK,’ he said after a moment. ‘You do that.’

Of course, once she was through the door and in the open, once the creature could see her coming, Benny was not so sure of her plan. The monstrous, bulbous form did not seem sure of it either: watching her warily as she approached, it swayed slightly as if in anticipation.

Benny stopped short of being within easy reach. ‘I have to get to Graize’s ship,’ she said, struggling to keep her voice even. ‘Will you let me past, please?’ Further along the corridor, behind the creature, a door opened slightly. Stuart looked out, and nodded to Benny.

Benny took a step forward. She raised the gun.

The creature snarled, its face screwed up and its eyes watching the gun intently. ‘It will take more than bullets,’ it hissed. ‘You know that.’

‘Do I?’

A low guttural sound came from the creature’s throat. It might have been laughter. ‘I know you, Professor Summerfield,’ it hissed. ‘I am you. I remember your fears and your terrors. I recall your most intimate moments as well as your obvious intelligence. I know you as well as you know yourself.’

‘I doubt that,’ Benny snapped.

But it was too late, the creature had swung round, had seen

Stuart creeping along the corridor towards the airlock door behind it. It let out a vicious snarl and swung back towards Benny. ‘You cannot pass.’ It spat. ‘You are dead.’

‘If you really are me,’ Benny said quietly, ‘then in a way, you’re right.’ She held the gun at arm’s length and fired.

The creature almost doubled over with grotesque laughter as the tiny flame licked out of the end of the pistol. It took a lurching step towards Benny, but it made no effort to grab

her. It seemed to be hugging itself in mirth. Then, in a moment, it recovered. And leapt for her.

Benny stepped aside, the creature landing at her feet, its clutching hands missing her by inches. It turned to face her, eyes fierce with hatred and face contorted with evil intent.

Benny kept her finger hard on the trigger, the flame flickered but held. She raised the atomizer and pointed it across the small flame towards the creature. Then she looked away.

The stream of alcohol-based perfume ignited in midair. The arc of fire spat across the short distance and splashed into the creature's face. It threw its hands across, trying to catch the fire, to stop the pain. The scream was low and melancholy. In a moment, the corridor was alive with the flickering of firelight and oily smoke billowed along it. The monster staggered back, its hideous shape lost in the clouds of smoke and ragged snatches of flame. Only its arms seemed able to escape from the fireball of its body as they flailed about, smashing back into where its face had been, trying to damp down the fire.

Benny watched open-mouthed, amazed at how flammable the creature seemed to be. Then she realized that it was not the creature itself so much as the thick glutinous liquid that clung to it from the growth tank. The liquid burnt fiercely, the creature beneath roasting in the flames. It crashed into the passage wall, bounced off, and collapsed to the floor.

As Benny edged past the screaming, thrashing form, she looked down. And as she looked down, the smoke cleared for an instant. She saw the blotched and boiling face staring up at her, the grey glutinous flesh peeling away like melting jelly and the white of the bone dyed red by the ambient light. For a split second she saw a familiar set to the chin, caught a glimpse of herself behind the eyes. Then the fire took hold again and smoke drifted across her vision. She blinked, swallowed, and ran to join Stuart at the airlock door.

The systems were a mess. There was little that Kirk could easily do to repair them, he realized, as he looked round the

control room. Most of the screens were smashed and all the ancillary power was diverted to the life-support systems and the emergency lighting.

He started on the monitoring apparatus. A limited repair might provide enough cover for them to track down the fugitives, and he had to start somewhere after all. After a few minutes, several of the monitors sprang into shaky life.

'I'm using some of the emergency power,' he explained to Graize. 'Life-support is less critical now. In fact, if we could shut it down completely that might solve the problem. We can always get back to the scout ship.'

The monitors showed various parts of the ship. Each picture changed after a few seconds to show another.

'The chances of just happening to see them on a random pattern is pretty remote,' Graize commented.

Kirk watched the images for a while. Behind him the synths shifted and muttered. I could set them to monitor just the key points,' he offered. 'Intersections, thoroughfares. The main docking bay.'

'Do it.'

Several corridors appeared on monitors. They were followed almost immediately by an internal view of the docking bay. In the foreground stood Kirk's ship. Behind it, a door sprang open, and a spacesuited figure stepped through into the bay. Over one arm it carried a linen jacket. Kirk's hands flew to the console, and as another suited figure followed the first, the image zoomed in on the figure's head. Summerfield's helmeted face swirled into focus on the monitor.

\* \* \*

'Have you ever flown one of these?' Benny asked Stuart as they opened the main hatch.

'No.'

Benny paused, turned to face him as the hatchway swung open. 'Stupid question, I guess. We may have one more slight technical hitch. I've never flown one either.'

Stuart gestured for her to go inside the scout ship. 'We'll be better off inside with the hatch locked, whatever we do next.' His voice crackled slightly through her helmet speakers.

The ship was small compared with the giant hulk of *Medusa*. But in fact, for a scout ship, it was fairly spacious. The hatch opened into the main cabin, where there were six rows of seats, four seats to each row. A narrow aisle ran up the middle leading to the door to the control deck at the front of the ship. At the back would be a storage area.

Benny laid her jacket carefully over the back of the nearest seat and pulled her heavy gloves off. She fumbled with the locking clamps on her helmet, unsnapping them at last and pulling it over her head. She took a deep breath and exhaled in relief. 'That's better.' Beside her, Stuart had removed his helmet too.

Along the side of the cabin were portholes. Through the thick toughened glass, Benny could see circlets of the docking bay, like an old film's view through binoculars. As Stuart pulled the hatch shut behind them and pushed the locking mechanism home, Benny glanced out of the porthole set into the door. Through the distortion of the rounded glass she saw the airlock door swing open. A group of the synthetic creatures charged through, running towards the ship as if in slow motion.

'Interesting,' said Stuart quietly, 'that they don't need suits.'

'Very,' Benny agreed half-heartedly. 'Is that hatch securely locked.'

'I hope so.' Stuart peered through the porthole. He took a swift step backward as a grey distended fist slapped heavily against the other side of the glass. 'I guess they can store oxygen in their lungs or whatever they have. Their skins must be pretty tough, too, under all that gunk.'

'Fascinating,' said Benny without meaning it. 'Let's hope they stay out there till their lungs burst.'

'Of course,' Stuart said, his voice disturbingly matter-of-fact, 'we might have done better not to lock ourselves in here.' Benny turned away from the hatch, and Stuart nodded towards the two hideous figures pushing their way towards them along the narrow aisle from the flight deck. 'With them.'

Benny grabbed her jacket from the back of the seat.

‘Thinking of leaving?’ Stuart asked, pulling her away down the aisle as the creatures lurched closer.

Benny did not answer, she was pulling at a sleeve, trying desperately to see how and where it was attached. She could feel the weight of the vodka bottle in a pocket, but couldn’t find a way to get to it. The shape of the lighter was muffled by layers of material. Somehow the sleeve was now inside out. Benny swore, and struggle to push her arm through.

‘Benny.’ Stuart’s voice was quiet, close to her ear. ‘What are you doing?’

‘I’m putting my jacket on. What does it look like I’m doing?’

‘Fine.’ They were almost backed up to the door into the storage area. ‘There might be something through here we can use as a weapon.’

‘There’s something in my pocket we can use as a weapon,’ Benny snapped back, if I can find my pocket. Ah!’ With a triumphant yelp she pulled a handkerchief free. She looked at it, turning the crumpled discoloured ball of material over in her hand. ‘Hold this a mo.’ She thrust it at Stuart.

The creatures were closing on them. Along the length of the cabin, macabre distorted faces peered in through the portholes, watching with piercing, small, black eyes as the two synths shuffled and lurched closer to Benny and Stuart. The leading creature had its arms out in front of it, clutching at the air, anticipating the kill Benny pulled the vodka bottle from her jacket pocket. She twisted the cap, but her fingers slid round the rusted metal without breaking the seal. She tried again, gripping it through her jacket to try to get a better purchase on the corroded surface. Still no good. She grabbed the hanky back from Stuart and pushed the bottle back at him. ‘Open this, will you?’

While Stuart fought with the bottle, and the synths lurched another pace closer, Benny pulled the pistol-shaped lighter from her pocket.

‘Here you go.’ Stuart held out the open bottle in one hand, the cap in the other.

Benny took the bottle. ‘Thanks,’ she said, and took a swig. The liquid burnt her throat so much she thought it must now

rival the metal cap for corrosion. 'Whew.' She blinked rapidly several times. 'That's better. Want some?' Stuart shook his head, and Benny stuffed her hanky into the top of the bottle, pushing it down with her index finger so that it trailed into the clear liquid inside.

Benny squeezed the trigger of the gun. The lighter clicked loudly. And nothing happened. She tried again. Still nothing. 'Bugger!'

The third time, a tiny flame appeared, dancing and dying back immediately. Benny touched it to a tail of the handkerchief, but it was gone before the fire could take hold. 'Bugger!' she said again, louder. She held the hanky over the end of the barrel, and pulled the trigger once more. A small flame shot through the thin material, spreading rapidly along it. Benny started in surprise and nearly dropped the bottle.

The synths paused, seeing the flame. Then they started to shuffle backward, almost falling over themselves as they tried to turn in the narrow space between the seats.

Benny did not wait to see if they succeeded. The top of the bottle was now a mass of flame. She hurled it at the creatures.

The bottle bounced off the arm of the first synth, unbroken. It dropped, colliding with the armrest on a chair as it went, spinning towards the cabin floor. As it impacted, it exploded in a shower of glass, vodka and flame. The liquid spilt out into a pool of burning blue light, running along the floor, washing against the feet of the creatures as they desperately tried to move away from it.

The flames took hold of them as soon as they touched the liquid clinging to the creatures' skin, running up their legs and swelling into a double fireball. The creatures thrashed and stumbled about in the narrow aisle, lashing out at each other and swinging their arms helplessly. Their screams were low guttural moans of agony as first one, then another, collapsed to the cabin floor.

Fire licked at the seats, but their retardant material refused to allow it to gain a hold.

Benny watched with a mixture of satisfaction and disgust. The stench from the oily black smoke was less than pleasant. It rolled along the floor of the cabin towards them, blotting out the sight of the writhing creatures as they pitched to and fro, their movements becoming weaker and less pronounced by the second. And ahead of the smoke came a thin stream of clear liquid. It burnt with a pale-blue flame as it ran towards Benny's feet.

Benny nudged Stuart, and pointed to the liquid. There was nowhere to go, they had their backs to the door. Stuart frantically stabbed at the unlocking mechanism as the burning vodka approached. But the door refused to open.

As the liquid reached her, Benny jumped, grabbing at the arm of one of the seats in the back row. She pulled herself over it and clear of the fire. Stuart followed a moment later. He sat down heavily across the aisle from Benny, slapping at the toe of his boot where a small blue flame flickered. In a few moments it was gone.

They sat alone in the smoky room. The fire had died down so that all that was left was a contorted and blackened pile in the middle of the cabin, smouldering slightly.

'I'll have the overcooked chicken on a bed of wild rice,' Benny said at last. 'It's good stuff, that Thrascanian double-strength vodka.'

'I think it's probably that liquid from the growth tanks that's so flammable,' Stuart replied. 'I'll get us out of here.'

'Hey, I thought you'd never flown a scout ship. Or any sort of ship, come to that.'

'I haven't.' Stuart got to his feet, waited for Benny, then led the way to the flight deck. They picked their way carefully over the charred mess in the aisle. 'But Kallis Shaw has, many times.'

Benny laughed. 'Of course. And what he knows, you know.'

'In theory.' He sat down in the pilot's chair and flexed his fingers, cracking each of them in turn with a noise that made Benny wince. 'Let's see how the practical demonstration turns out.' He stared at the controls, then pointed to a digital readout. 'What do you suppose that is?'



Benny strapped herself into the co-pilot's chair. 'It's a clock,' she said through gritted teeth. A grey bulbous face peered in through the main window beside her. She stuck her tongue out at it, and was amused to see the creature's eyes widen in surprise.

'I have learnt something, though,' Stuart said as he started the pre-flight checks.

'Oh? What's that?'

'*Bugger*,' he said, 'is not an archaeological term at all, now is it?'

Benny settled back in her seat, arms folded, looking straight ahead. 'Might be,' she said.

The similarity of Taffeta Graize watched impatiently as Styurus Kirk rerouted emergency power. 'If you want something doing...' She shook her head in disappointment.

On one of the monitors, the scout ship was manoeuvring within the docking bay. Several of the creatures had been caught in the exhaust blast, others were staggering back towards the airlock in as much haste as they could manage.

'Almost there,' Kirk said. 'Just a few moments, and we'll have them.'

'I should hope so.' Graize turned away, back towards the ballroom, as if she could see the scout ship emerging from the docking bay and appearing outside the huge picture window against the impressive vista of space.

'Right. Done it.' Kirk slapped his hands together in satisfaction. 'There's enough residual power for targeting and several shots.'

The scout ship moved slowly away from the massive form of *Medusa*. Towards the front of the larger ship was mounted a laser cannon used to blast asteroids and space debris out of the way. The laser cannon swung slowly, ponderously, to face the escaping scout ship. The barrel glowed a dull red as the systems charged up ready to fire.

'Laser lock!' Stuart pointed to a control on the main panel. A red image of target-sight hairlines was flashing over a

silhouette of the scout ship. At the same moment a klaxon went off somewhere close to Benny's left ear.

'What's that mean?'

'It means they've got us in their sights. Better brace yourself.'

The ship lurched violently to one side, throwing Benny against the armrest of her seat. She yelped in pain as the arm dug into her ribs. 'Are we hit?'

'They haven't fired yet,' Stuart told her. 'I'm taking evasive action.'

'Great,' Benny muttered. 'This is what the *good* guys are doing to me.'

'Firing now.' Kirk's finger stabbed down on the firing button. From within the ship came a deep rumble as the laser cannon expended a charge of energy. Without power for the noise-cancellation shielding, the sound was clearly audible.

On the cracked monitor in front of Kirk, a ray of energy lanced out across the blackness of space towards the tiny scout ship as it tilted and rolled in a desperate attempt to avoid the shot. There was a flash of expended energy just to the side of the ship, sending it careering out of control. Then it bounced, rolled, and righted itself.

'You missed,' Graize snapped.

'Ranging shot.' The scar was a livid white against Kirk's chin as he hunched over the controls. 'The targeting systems will give us correction factors calculated from it. The computer will put the next one smack on top of them.'

On reflection, Benny decided as she turned upside down and the ship tumbled wildly out of control, Stuart's evasive action had not been so bad. The klaxon was still sounding in her ear, and the laser-lock indicator was now flashing a vivid scarlet with the text HOSTILE LOCK printed helpfully over it for those who couldn't work that out from the intuitive user interface. Stuart was wrestling with the controls, trying to get the ship back on an even keel.

'They'll get us next time,' he said through gritted teeth. 'They'll be realigning the sights now.'

Kirk tapped his fingers on the console. 'Come on,' he hissed, come on. Where's the transponder information?'

'Problem?' Graize asked quietly.

'There should be a vocal message confirming the targeting factors to be applied, so we can lock on to their transponder signal.' Kirk's voice was a painful rasp as he frowned. 'Maybe the audio has shorted out.' He pulled away an access panel and reached inside. His hand emerged holding two broken ends of wire. 'That's it.' His face creased into a semblance of a smile. 'We have them now. It's all under control.' He twisted the wires back together, and an electronically synthesized voice spoke calmly through the monitor's speakers.

'Terminal reactor overload will occur in five seconds,' the cold, metallic voice said.

Kirk stared at the wires still in his hands. His face was a mask of disbelief. Then a grating scream of rage erupted from his throat and he dived for the firing button.

'Terminal overload in three seconds,' the voice said.

'All under control?' Graize seemed faintly amused by the notion. 'I think not.'

'Destruction of *Medusa* will occur.'

Kirk's hand slammed down on the button.

The second shot was even closer than the first. The scout ship lurched and rolled under the near impact. For a second Benny thought she was going to be sick as the world turned upside down, and she along with it.

The ship spun in a half-circle, pointing back towards *Medusa*. 'Great,' Benny said, her voice lost in the cacophony from the warning alarms and the roar of the motors as Stuart tried to regain control. 'Now I get to see it coming.'

But instead of the brilliantly bright beam of energy scything through space towards them that Benny expected, there was a sudden explosion. *Medusa* was consumed in an instant by a huge silent fireball that erupted from inside. The fire and debris spread out in all directions, a Shockwave of fire and

light swelling towards the scout ship. And in the centre, for a split second, Benny thought she saw a tiny figure etched in light behind the rush of the wave of energy racing headlong towards the scout ship. The figure was a woman with pale blonde hair, standing in the eye of the explosion. Then the light was gone, and the shock wave struck them.

## CHAPTER 15

Benny made the call from Braxiatel's office. Together with Stuart, she had described the events on *Medusa* to Braxiatel, and he had listened patiently, if apparently slightly amused.

'These timeslips interest me,' he had commented when they finished. 'The gas in the canister, I think, was an alpha-wave enhancer of some sort. A crude way of heightening memory traces. But with your special background, shall we say -' he nodded to Stuart '- and the receptive nature of everyone else it may have helped you to broadcast your innate memories in some random fashion to the others.' He smiled at Benny. 'So you get to dance with Stuart's memories, even before he really knows he has any.'

Benny leant back in the chair behind his desk, arms folded behind her head and legs crossed. Out of sight of the imaging system, Braxiatel, Stuart and Commander Skutloid watched silently. The desk had been cleared of anything that might suggest that it was not Benny's own. Braxiatel had shifted a small plaque that declared he was Keeper of the Library of St John the Beheaded together with several piles of papers and optical discs. Stuart had helped, moving several ornaments, including a long sharp paperknife shaped like a miniature sword complete with hilt and knuckle-guard.

'I'd like to speak with the director, if I may,' Benny said when the call connected.

A bored-looking woman with a grey face stared back at her without blinking. 'I'm afraid the director is not available, she said without enthusiasm or encouragement. 'Perhaps I can take a message.'

'Perhaps you can,' Benny conceded, swinging the chair from side to side. 'Perhaps you could tell him that Professor Bernice Summerfield called and would welcome a little chat about a deal we *used* to have.'

‘Certainly.’ The woman reached forward to break the connection. She never made it.

Instead the image swam and flickered before morphing into a different one. The man now looking back at Benny was tall and thin. His hair was a silver contrast to his dark skin. He smiled, showing brilliantly white teeth. ‘Professor Summerfield, what a pleasant surprise.’

‘Director Silvera. You’re well, I hope?’

‘Indeed.’ He steeped his hands on his desk. ‘And what can I do for you, Professor? Have you decided perhaps to accept the fellowship I offered you with the Advanced Research Department?’

Benny smiled. ‘No. Thank you. Though I have recently done some work for one of your people.’

‘Oh?’

‘Taffeta Graize.’

Santos Silvera’s face froze. ‘Oh,’ he said. ‘Ah.’

“Ooh-er” might be closer to the mark.’ Benny leant forward. ‘Would I be right in thinking that the *Medusa* experiment and that business at DevCorps with the Project are related?’

The director considered before he replied, his finger and thumb pinching at his bottom lip. Then he said, ‘Taffeta Graize was working in the area of genetic research. When DevCorps came to us for help with their particular problem, it was a good fit. We got funding to enable Graize to continue her work while helping out a client in a related area.’

‘So the DevCorps Project was a refinement of her process of creating creatures genetically?’

Silvera nodded. ‘Closely related work. The other aspects of Graize’s *Medusa* work were not so readily applicable, and of course unproven since *Medusa* had never returned.’ He smiled. ‘You realize, I hope, that our agreement only related to the DevCorps project. Not to *Medusa*.’

‘That,’ said Benny, ‘is about as convincing an argument as the works of those historians who claim there was a fifth Teletubby. But,’ she went on, ‘I think we can reach a mutually agreeable solution.’

A nerve ticked at the edge of Silvera's left eye. His voice hardened. 'What exactly do you want, Summerfield?'

When the conversation was over, Benny broke the connection and turned to her friends. 'I think that went OK.'

Braxiatel agreed. 'He was somewhat relieved you were asking for so little.'

Benny shrugged. 'Turning a blind eye and agreeing to make no comment are probably pretty routine for him any way.' She stood up. 'Stuart and I have things to finish,' she said. 'But neither of you have to join us if you don't want to. This isn't your problem.'

Skutloid and Braxiatel exchanged glances. Skutloid answered first. 'We will both go with you, Benny. And I shall bring a few colleagues from the institute. Braxiatel knows them, we have worked together before, and I think they will be useful additions to our team.'

'Thank you,' Benny said. 'But -'

Skutloid held up his hand to stop her. 'I too have things to settle with Taffeta Graize.' Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but for a second Benny thought she caught a glimpse of moist eyes behind the glass shields set directly into Skutloid's green, scaly face. 'Maryann Decliter was a friend of mine. For our race, there is no rest in violent death until the one responsible for that death has atoned for it. While Maryann was not from Neo Aries, I think that the same is often true for humans.'

Benny took his hand, felt the claws at the end of his huge fingers dig into her palm. 'Thanks,' she said. 'We appreciate your help.'

Stuart nodded in agreement as Benny turned to Braxiatel.

'And what about you?'

Braxiatel was already moving things back on to his desk. 'Oh, I'll come along. You know I will. I have certain, shall we say, concerns about some of the work at the Advanced Research Department. So this little foray will enable me to spy out the land, so to speak.' He smiled and placed his small plaque at the front of the desk, aligning it so it was square to the sides. 'And it strikes me that while you've just

made some arrangements with Director Silvera which will facilitate your entry to the ARD and your subsequent escape, there are some important things that need to be planned out for the time in between. I think I can offer some small help there. Provided we can hack into their online data systems.’ He looked down at the desk, counting off the ornaments with his finger.

‘Your help will be appreciated,’ Stuart said quietly, apparently taking Braxiatel’s gesture as an offer of a handshake. He took Braxiatel’s outstretched hand and clasped it firmly.

Braxiatel stared at Stuart for a moment. ‘Yes,’ he said quietly. ‘Of course.’ Then he nodded. ‘I’m sure it’s the best way, when all’s said and done.’

‘OK, then,’ said Benny. ‘Let’s get planning.’ There was a short section of the high black wall that surrounded the Advanced Research Department where the searchlights had failed. It was not by chance that Benny and her friends were standing right beside it when the lights went out, exactly at the time that Benny had arranged with Silvera. The security guards would not notice the failure for an hour, and it would take at least another hour on top of that for the faulty component to be identified and replaced.

As soon as the lights faded and the wall receded into the blackness of the night, Benny and the others ran over to the middle point of the dark section of wall. Skutloid had equipped Benny, Stuart and Braxiatel with night-vision gear.

Benny had expected cumbersome goggles, but was surprised and relieved to be given what looked like a pair of sunglasses with thick, apparently opaque, lenses. When she slipped them on, the night retreated, and she found herself looking at a sharp if washed-out image of the wall and the area round it. She turned to Stuart in surprise, and found he was already looking back at her.

Braxiatel placed a hand on each of their shoulders. ‘Technology,’ he whispered, ‘I love it. Come on, we’ve got things to do.’



Skutloid and his two colleagues were already at the wall. Their names were Drexton and Garshal, and they were both even more massive and powerfully built than Skutloid. Each had a large rucksack slung across his back and an assortment of weapons and appliances hanging from a heavy belt. Braxiatel had been more than usually vague when Benny had asked what sort of thing they had worked on together previously. Skutloid had been slightly more helpful, describing the two reptilian hulks as 'soldiers of honour'.

Whatever they were, the Neo Arietians had unpacked what looked to Benny suspiciously like a laser cannon and were assembling it on a tripod. Before long it was complete, and pointing at a spot close to the bottom of the wall. A point of light flared on the black material, making Benny blink until the night-vision glasses adjusted for the change in luminosity. Then she could see a small droplet of black liquid escape from behind the light and run down to the ground.

Before long a deep gash was visible in the wall as the lance moved slowly upward, cutting its way through as it went.

'The alarm systems were all disabled when the lights failed,' Skutloid said with evident satisfaction. 'When we seal the hole again after we leave, it will be discernible but not obvious. They will eventually find how and where we got through.'

'There's value in that,' Braxiatel said. 'Silvera needs it to be an outside job to avoid a scandal.'

'You mean, if anyone inside the ARD did it, someone could claim that he should have known what Graize was up to?' Stuart asked.

Braxiatel nodded. 'Plausible deniability.'

Benny waited until everyone was concentrating again on the lance's progress through the wall. Then she asked Braxiatel quietly, 'Is that why we aren't taking an easier way in?'

'There are other options,' Braxiatel admitted. 'But yes, just to appear inside with no apparent explanation could be problematic.' His voice was suddenly serious. 'And there are

some things that are best kept to ourselves for the moment. Cards we may need to play as trumps in another game.'

Benny frowned. 'Trouble coming?'

Braxiatel smiled suddenly, and Benny knew the moment was gone, that he had told her as much as he was going to for the moment. 'There's always trouble coming,' he said. 'The readiness is all.'

There was a harsh scraping sound from the wall. Benny turned to see Skutloid and his troopers pushing out the section they had cut away like a giant plug. It was a large circle of material cut free just above ground level, and dropped to the ground behind with a heavy thump. Everyone looked round to see if anyone had heard the sound and was running to investigate.

When nobody appeared out of the night to challenge them, Skutloid drew a blaster from the holster on his belt, and stepped through the hole in the wall. Skutloid seemed to have to bend almost double to get his massive frame through. Benny followed him, and did not even have to stoop.

Drexton and Garshal came through last, pulling the laser lance after them. They pushed it into the shadows, then heaved the round plug of black material upright and lifted it back into the hole. They pushed it roughly into place. In the dim light the wall seemed unscathed.

'Which way?' Skutloid asked.

Benny pointed towards one of the taller buildings. 'Graize's offices are in that block.'

Stuart nodded. 'That's where the *Medusa* project was housed. If things haven't changed too much, I know a back way in.'

The screen on the wall sprang into life. The calm, dignified features of Santos Silvera swam into focus.

'Director.' Taffeta Graize was surprised. 'I expected you -'

'You expected me in person.' He smiled. 'I'm sorry. I know that I asked specifically for a full briefing this evening, and that you have put yourself out by staying on at the facility.'

'Not at all.'

‘I’m sure you have. And so I must apologize most abjectly for the fact that I shall have to postpone our meeting.’

Graize nodded. In a way it was a relief. While the Director called it ‘evening’, it was in reality the middle of the night. The prospect of briefing him on how the *Medusa* project was progressing just now was hardly convenient, and the status of the project was unlikely to elicit his praise. How long could she put him off? A week perhaps?

‘That’s a shame, Director,’ she replied keeping her voice level. ‘Perhaps another time soon.’

‘Indeed, indeed.’ He was still smiling. ‘I know you will have gone to a lot of effort to prepare for this, and I’m sorry for the unavoidable delay.’ He shrugged. ‘These things happen, I’m afraid.’

‘Of course. I understand.’ She smiled back at him.

‘So shall we plan to meet instead in... what?’ He waved a hand as if sifting through the air for an answer. ‘Two hours from now?’

Graize’s smile froze to her face. ‘Hours?’

‘Perhaps I could manage one and a half. I’ll see what I can do.’ The director’s face grew larger on the screen as he leant forward, his hand already reaching for the connection control. He paused, at full stretch. ‘You had nothing else planned for this evening, I hope?’

‘No, Director,’ she said quietly. But the screen was already blank.

Taffeta Graize sat at her desk for a while, tapping her fingers on the steel surface. Then she stood up, scooped a remote-control handset from the desktop, and went back to the ballroom.

The door that Stuart led them to was in a blind spot between security cameras. The entry codes had changed, but Skutloid’s troopers had it open in no time. Stuart led the way through the building and up the access stairs to the floor where Graize’s office was situated.

He pushed the door at the top of the stairs open slightly and looked through. ‘Whoa!’

‘What is it?’ Benny asked, struggling to see past the others. ‘Is she in there?’ From beyond the door she could hear what sounded like a party in full swing. An orchestra was playing, glasses were clinking, people were talking.

Stuart said nothing. He pushed the door fully open and stepped through. Skutloid and Braxiatel followed. Benny could see into the room now. It was as if the whole of the floor of the building was taken up with a single room. And that room was the ballroom from *Medusa*. Rather than turn to look at the unexpected arrivals, the mass of people on and around the dance floor melted away as Benny watched. In a moment the room was empty, apart from a solitary figure sitting alone at a distant table.

Benny followed Braxiatel, barely aware that Drexton and Garshal were close behind her, their blasters drawn and ready.

‘This time, it’s the champagne that is a similarity.’

Taffeta Graize had a bottle of champagne in front of her, a glass poured out. Beside it lay a small remote-control device. ‘It’s just a guess,’ she said, ‘but would I be right in thinkin g that Director Silvera has no idea that you are here? And that he is currently attending some function where there are a dozen unapproachable witnesses who can later swear he was with them?’

Braxiatel was the first to reach her as they crossed the dance floor, it’s what I would do,’ he said. He waved a hand through the similarity of a chair. ‘I must say, it’s a little impolite to take the only real chair, Miss Graize.’

She looked up at him, then round at the others. ‘You have the advantage over me, I’m afraid. Are you more of Professor Summerfield’s lackies?’

Skutloid drew a loud breath. But before he could respond, Braxiatel laughed. ‘I’ve never been called that before. At least, not to my knowledge.’ He reached out for the simulated chair again, and this time his hand seemed to close on the back as he pulled it out from the table and sat down. ‘My name is Irving Braxiatel,’ he said, apparently oblivious to Graize’s gasp of astonishment. ‘My friends and I wanted to have a

little chat.' He lifted the remote control from the table. 'Now this looks interesting,' he murmured, examining it closely. 'Not to say useful.'

'This is very impressive,' Benny said gesturing round at the room, 'is this where you created the similarity of the whole ship?'

'This,' Stuart said, 'is where the *Medusa* project was born. This was the main lab.'

Graize had recovered somewhat by now. She frowned at Stuart. 'That's true. This is also the largest open area available. At full scale we navigate the ship one element at a time - a set of rooms, a corridor, whatever.'

'Presumably you can scale it down to look at the whole thing in miniature?' Braxiatel asked. Graize nodded. 'And I see that you can replay any events you have recorded within this simulated space, a similarity within a similarity.' He waved the remote-control unit under her nose pointing out the relevant buttons.

'You don't seem very concerned at our visit,' Benny said. 'Why is that?'

Graize fixed her with a piercing stare from her bright green eyes. 'I doubt you managed to get in without triggering at least one security alarm. I don't anticipate having to put up with your company for long.'

'We could kill you now,' Skutloid snapped. 'As you killed Maryann Decler.''

'Ah yes, poor Maryann.' Graize leant back in her chair and looked up at his huge form. 'But if you had come here to kill me, I would already be dead. So what *are* you after?'

'The truth,' Benny said. 'That's all.'

'Oh that's a very difficult commodity to get hold of.'

'Well, let's start with whatever events you were watching replayed when we came in, shall we?' Braxiatel studied the buttons on the control unit carefully. 'Ah, here we are. I'm sure this is the best vantage point to watch it from, here beside you.' He pressed one of the buttons, and the room sprang into life.

The people were dressed in finery and elegance. Some were dancing or standing watching, others sitting drinking and chatting at tables. Waiters were carrying trays of drinks and snacks between the guests. The sound of a small orchestra playing a waltz seemed to come from all around.

‘It’s the dance to mark the completion of *Medusa*,’ Stuart said above the noise. He pointed across the room at a young man with thinning hair. ‘There’s Frimptin. And over there is Laine.’

Benny nodded at another man, he was middle-aged with a short beard and slicked-back, dark hair. His eyes were set deep. He was talking to a woman who had her back to them. The woman’s long blonde hair hung down her back almost to her waist. ‘That’s Kallis Shaw,’ Benny said.

‘And,’ Stuart said, ‘he’s talking to Taffeta Graize.’

‘How do you know all this?’ Graize demanded. She seemed more worried now. When Skutloid motioned to Garshal, and the massive Neo Arietian swung his blaster round to point directly at Graize, she seemed even more worried.

The singularity of Graize turned from Kallis Shaw and looked across the room towards them. Or rather, Benny realized, through them. She turned to follow the direction of Graize’s stare. At a table behind them a man was sitting alone. He looked totally at ease with himself, watching the dancing couples. The music ended and he stood up and clapped. He was tall and handsome with short dark hair. A woman ran from the dance floor, up to the man. She stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the cheek. He smiled at her and helped her to a chair, pulling it away from the table for her.

‘That’s Jackson Hart,’ Stuart said quietly.

‘I know,’ Benny replied quietly. ‘I’ve danced with him.’

Across the room, the simulated Graize frowned as she watched Hart and the girl. Then she excused herself from Shaw, and made her way to a nearby table. Several people were sitting round the table, and she tapped one of them on the shoulder, and then whispered briefly to him. The man

nodded, said something to his colleagues, and then he and Graize walked together to a quiet corner of the ballroom.

‘What’s that about?’ Benny asked. ‘Social chitchat.’

‘She’s talking to Cragton,’ Stuart said. ‘I wonder what they’re saying.’

Graize, the real Graize, started to say something. But Garshal jabbed the gun towards her, and she fell silent.

‘Let’s listen in, shall we?’ Braxiatel said. He adjusted a control on the remote, and Taffeta Graize’s voice became clearly audible above the general hubbub as that receded into the background.

‘I only just found out,’ she was saying. ‘It’s incredible. Criminal. We have to stop it.’

‘I agree.’ Cragton sounded angry. ‘Let’s tell the others. Now.’

Graize touched his arm. ‘No, this is hardly the place. And we need more proof. And I need to stay out of this: there’s a chance they’ll confide in me if I confront them.’

Cragton shook his head. ‘I want no part in this. And neither will any of the others. Laine will go ballistic.’

‘Give me a few days. A week at the most. I’ll find out what I can, see what I can do.’

They continued to talk, but their words were drowned out by Stuart’s. ‘You told him,’ he said to Graize in amazement.

‘You told Cragton what the experiment was really about. It was because of you he went round and got us together that night.’ He shook his head. ‘Why, for God’s sake?’

Graize’s eyes narrowed. ‘What do you mean, “us”?’ she said. ‘Just who exactly are you?’

Stuart’s reply was quiet, but hard. ‘You know who I am.’

Graize’s eyes widened in realization. ‘Then it worked. *Medusa* was a success.’

‘Tell that to the jury,’ Benny said. In the background, the nonexistent orchestra struck up another tune and the dancers started again.

‘Is that what all this is about?’

‘Yeah. We’re taking you out of here to stand trial.’

‘What for?’

‘How about multiple murder?’ Benny suggested. ‘And we’re not going to have another show trial within the Advanced Research Department like Jackson Hart. This will be fair and independent.’

Graize nodded slowly. ‘I see. And since you are yourselves from outside, the director will be able to deny that anyone within the department, including himself, knew anything about my research.’

‘Or your methods.’

Braxiatel was working on the remote control, pressing buttons and adjusting settings. After a few moments, the scene froze. Cragton and Graize were poised in mid-conversation. A girl on the dance floor was off her feet, impossibly suspended in midair beside her laughing partner.

Graize stood, ignoring the blaster Garshal had levelled at her. She walked over to the next table, where Jackson Hart sat smiling at the girl opposite, glass in hand. Graize walked round him, looked down into his face. She reached out a hand, as if to stroke his cheek, but pulled it away again. Finally, she looked up and gazed across the room. She smiled.

‘I think that’s enough of this nonsense,’ she said. ‘I suggest you drop your weapons before things get nasty.’ As she spoke, half a dozen heavily armed ARD security guards pushed through the silent and still figures in the ballroom towards the area where Graize and the others were gathered. Their commander hung back, but the guards levelled their weapons at Benny and her friends.

Garshal and Drexton looked to Skutloid, who turned to Braxiatel. He nodded, and the Neo Arietians slowly lowered their weapons to the floor.

‘We must have triggered an alarm after all,’ Braxiatel said in a resigned tone.

‘Or perhaps Director Silvera was not so cooperative as you imagined,’ Graize suggested. The elation was obvious in her voice.



‘So what now?’ Benny asked. ‘It will all come out one way or another, you know.’

It was the leader of the security guards who answered. ‘I don’t think so,’ he said, stepping forward into the light. His voice was a dry, painful rasp. The scar on his chin gleamed whiter than his teeth as Styru Kirk smiled horribly.

‘Kirk!’ Graize was the most surprised of them all. ‘How did you escape from *Medusa*?’

‘It’s a long story,’ he said. ‘Let’s deal with the situation at hand first.’

‘Oh but I like stories,’ Braxiatel chimed in. ‘Stories of intrigue and violence, heroism and evil, death and honour.’ He turned to Graize. ‘I’m fascinated to know why you told Cragton about the true nature of the *Medusa* project, for example.’

Graize glanced at Kirk. He remained still, blaster drawn, smile fixed. Then she said, ‘All right. Since I seem to have control of the situation now, I can afford to be magnanimous.’

‘Gracious in victory?’ Benny suggested.

‘Condescending before execution,’ Graize retorted. She settled herself down at the table again. ‘Where should I begin?’

‘Begin,’ Stuart said, ‘with Hart.’

She nodded, looked back at the similarity of Jackson Hart behind them. ‘Ah yes, Hart. Dear Jackson.’ She paused, her lip showing the faintest hint of a quiver. ‘He was so clever, so gifted. So handsome.’ She shook her head slightly. ‘So everything.’

‘And you were jealous?’ Stuart asked.

‘Oh yes, I was jealous.’

‘So you set him up,’ Benny said. ‘You arranged for the whole team to be killed, just to get at Hart.’

Graize shook her head. ‘They would have worked it out eventually. I merely hastened the process.’

‘Once the research team knew the truth, they had to be killed,’ Braxiatel said quietly. ‘And you tipped off Cragton knowing it would mean the deaths of them all. Your sponsors

could not allow the research team to make waves or to reveal the truth.'

Graize sat perfectly still. For a while she said nothing. 'There really was no other way,' she murmured.

'But Hart wasn't there, was he?' Stuart said. 'You missed me. Kirk killed all the others, but by a fluke he missed Hart. So you used him as a scapegoat instead. Execution rather than murder.'

'It comes to the same thing,' Benny pointed out. 'In the end it's still murder.' She turned to Graize. 'You murdered them all, didn't you? That's really what it boils down to.'

But still Graize said nothing. No comment, no confession.

Stuart put a hand on Graize's shoulder. She flinched with surprise and looked up at him. Kirk took a step forward. 'He never knew,' Stuart told her. 'Jackson Hart never knew that you were behind it.'

'So, you do have his memories,' said Graize.

'His memories, his emotions. His personality, among others. But Jackson Hart's is the dominant persona in my make-up, the only uncontrolled, unregulated constituent.'

Graize looked up at him, her green eyes alive with inner intensity. 'He never guessed?' she asked.

'Never.' Stuart lifted his hand from her shoulder and stroked her cheek. She did not flinch this time. 'He loved you so much.' He turned away, lowered his head.

For a moment Graize was still. Then she laughed. And in the laugh was a hint of her sadness. 'Loved me?' She shook her head. 'Look at him.' She pointed across at where Hart sat frozen, glass in hand, smiling across the table at the young woman.

As Benny watched, Hart and the woman started to move again. Around the room, the party came back to life, picking up from where it had paused. Hart and the woman stood and made their way to the dance floor. A waltz was playing, as they joined the dancers. The woman closed her eyes as they danced, close to each other. With a start, Benny realized that the woman was Anni Goranson, that this was the dance she had joined in the timeslip aboard *Medusa*.

'Look at him!' Graize snarled again. Around them the guests and waiters moved and talked and laughed oblivious to the real people present. The security guards remained silent and unmoved, their guns covering Benny and her friends.

'Yes,' Stuart said, 'look at him. See where he is looking.'

Benny watched carefully as the couple disappeared behind other people, then emerged again further round the dance floor. Stuart was right: Jackson Hart was not looking at Anni Goranson. He was staring across the dance floor, at a fixed point. Even as they twisted and turned in the dance, he continued to focus on the same place.

The whole time, he was looking at Taffeta Graize as she stood at the back of the room with Cragton.

'He's looking at you,' Stuart said. 'He's hoping, praying, that you will look back at him, catch his eye, smile. Any thing.'

As he spoke, the similarity of Taffeta Graize broke away from Cragton and stared across at Hart and Goranson as they whirled across the dance floor. She did not smile. Instead, she turned and walked from the room. Over the sounds of the party, Benny could hear her high heels cracking a staccato rhythm on the wooden floor as she crossed the dance area.

Even from twenty feet and twenty years away, it was obvious that Hart was devastated. He stopped in mid-step. Then he murmured something to Anni Goranson, and led her from the dance floor.

'I think,' Benny said as the party froze again, 'that you may have made a mistake when you killed them all.'

Braxiatel tapped the remote control against his chin. 'Embarrassing, if nothing else.'

Graize was on her feet. 'No,' she hissed. 'No, it can't - I -' She broke off. Her face was drained of colour. 'I loved him,' she said. 'I loved him, and I killed him.' She shook her head in disbelief. 'I killed them all, for him. And to keep the experiment secret. It had to be secret.'

‘And others too,’ Braxiatel said quietly. ‘Maryann Declleiter, for example.’

‘Poor Maryann.’ Graize still seemed shocked, her voice was quiet and distant. ‘I had to kill her. She knew too much.’

‘Am I right in thinking she just confessed to the murder of the *Medusa* research team?’ Benny asked.

‘That is what I heard,’ Skutloid said with evident satisfaction. ‘And Maryann will be avenged.’

Graize seemed to recover at this, standing up and pointing at Skutloid. ‘I don’t care what you heard,’ she snapped. And neither will anyone else. Nobody will know. No witnesses,’ she said. ‘No evidence. Nothing.’ She turned to Styrys Kirk. ‘Kill them, kill them all now.’

Skutloid, Drexton and Garshal were already retrieving their weapons. They seemed in no particular hurry. Kirk and the guards did not move. They seemed frozen in place, as if unsure whether to obey Graize or not.

‘Get on with it,’ she screamed as Skutloid brought his blaster up to cover her. ‘Quickly!’

Braxiatel held up the remote control. ‘As you said, that’s enough of this nonsense.’ He pressed a sequence of buttons, and the ARD guards winked out of existence. Kirk shimmered in the air before them, then he too faded away.

‘No!’ Graize sat down heavily and put her face in her hands. ‘You won’t get away with this,’ she said at last. ‘The truth will never come out.’

‘The truth,’ Benny said, ‘has already come out. We are recording a similarity of this whole meeting. I think it includes confessions and evidence aplenty.’ She grinned. ‘It will make the trial a lot simpler.’

Graize looked up at them. Her eyes fixed eventually on Stuart. ‘You really have his memories?’ she asked. ‘That part wasn’t a lie was it? You really *are* Jackson Hart?’ He nodded. ‘And he did love me? All the time you were in love with me?’

‘Yes.’ Stuart’s voice was strained. ‘Yes, he - I - loved you.’

Graize looked away. ‘He never said.’

Stuart looked round at them. Braxiatel raised an eyebrow. Benny met Stuart’s gaze, saw the moisture in his eyes. She

nodded quickly, then looked away. He reached down and took Taffeta Graize's hand. 'It's over,' he said quietly. 'It's all over. But dance with me now. This last time.'

Braxiatel thumbed the remote, and the music of the waltz started up again. The frozen figures from the party faded away, leaving the room clear as Stuart led Taffeta Graize out on to the dance floor. She held him tight as they danced.

As they turned slowly to the music, Benny could see Graize's tear-stained face over Stuart's shoulder. But as the couple swung round, she saw that Stuart's expression had hardened. His jaw was set, his face a mask of anger and determination. She felt an awful moment of apprehension, a cold lump in the pit of her stomach, as Stuart let go of Graize with one hand and reached into his jacket pocket with the other.

Benny took a step forward, then froze as the dancers spun round again. Graize was leaning back now, held up by Stuart's arm around her. They continued to move to the music, Graize staring up at the chandelier high above them. The music swelled, and the blood ran in a steady stream down her chest, splashing to the wooden floor. Then suddenly, Stuart let go of her, and Graize's body slumped down into the sticky pool. The handle of a long, thin knife was sticking out from her chest. It was shaped like a miniature sword complete with hilt and knuckle-guard.

Stuart stood over the body, gazing down at it with a look of contempt. He prodded the body with his toe. 'I may have his memories,' he said, 'but I am not Jackson Hart.'

Benny watched Braxiatel cross the floor. He knelt down by Graize's body, feeling for a pulse. Then he grasped the hilt of the paperknife and drew it from the corpse. It made an unpleasant sucking sound as it pulled free. 'Mine, I believe.' He wiped it on Graize's skirt, then put it in his inside jacket pocket.

'I think it is time we left,' Skutloid said to Benny.

'He killed her,' she said, still numb with the shock. 'We were going to get justice, do it properly. Not like this.' She stared up at Skutloid's impassive face. 'He just killed her.'

Skutloid laid a huge hand on her shoulder, squeezing gently. 'Justice, he said, 'has been done. Maryann will rest peacefully now. And so will the others.'

As he spoke, the ballroom shimmered and faded away around them, leaving a vast open space. The walls were painted a plain white, and the floor was bare concrete. In the middle of the room lay Taffeta Graize's body, the blood spreading in a dark, viscous pool.

The journey back to the Theatrology Department passed off with no incident and little comment. Dawn was breaking as they arrived at Braxiatel's suite of offices. Drexton and Garshal had already excused themselves and faded into the night. They had, Skutloid explained, another engagement in a neighbouring system and had deferred their departure for a few hours to help out their old friend and former commanding officer.

Now Braxiatel showed them into the drawing room that adjoined his study. Somehow fresh tea was ready, and he handed round cups.

'Ah,' Skutloid said with obvious delight as he took the delicate bone-china cup in his huge fist and lifted it carefully to his mouth. 'This makes it all worthwhile.'

'Does it?' Benny asked. 'Does it really?'

Braxiatel placed a cup and saucer on a side table close to her. 'in many ways it is the best outcome for everyone,' he said quietly.

'I know that,' Benny admitted. 'And I know that you would never have let Stuart take the knife if you hadn't already worked that out.' She took a deep breath. 'But being seven mental jumps ahead of the rest of us doesn't make doing what's right actually *right*. If you know what I mean.' She shook her head and reached for her tea. 'Never mind. It doesn't matter.'

'Yes it does,' Stuart said. He knelt on the floor beside her feet. 'I won't pretend what I did was defensible. It was murder, however you look at it. I had my reasons, my excuses, just as Taffeta Graize had hers. But having them

doesn't justify it at all. It was an emotive, emotional act, not a rational or moral one.'

Benny smiled weakly. 'You're saying it wasn't you who did it: it was Jackson Hart?'

'No. No, I'm saying just the opposite.' He stood up, pacing up and down in front of her as he spoke. 'Like I said, I am not Jackson Hart. Whoever I am, whatever I am, it's not any of the people whose memories I have. But I do have those memories, I do know those people - better than they ever really knew themselves in some cases.'

He stopped pacing, and looked Benny straight in the eye. 'And I know what Taffeta Graize did to them. I was there, I felt it. I experienced it and I remember it. I carry that weight, and it is so much heavier than the burden of having seen my other friends and colleagues gunned down, of having stood trial for their murder. It's not just that I felt justice had to be done: I had to do it myself. For them. For me.' He shook his head, it's another memory I have to live with,' he said. 'But I will live with it, and it is my own memory.'

Benny nodded. She said nothing. She was tired, and she was close to tears.

It was Skutloid who did speak. 'I'm no philosopher,' he said, 'but as far as I'm concerned, your actions need no defence.' He set down his cup carefully on its saucer. 'You humans have a phrase which is particularly apt in these sorts of situations: "She had it coming".'

'Have some tea,' Braxiatel offered. 'Or must you leave straightaway?'

'Leave?' Benny was surprised. 'Where are you going?'

Stuart smiled. 'I don't know, really. But your friend is right. I must go.'

'Why?'

Stuart raised his hands, then let them drop. 'There's a whole universe out there to explore,' he said. 'For myself.'

'Oh. I see.' And she did.

'Before you go,' Braxiatel said, 'I have something for you.' He went out into his study, returning a few moments later with a large brown envelope. It was stained with age, the

edges crumpled. He handed it to Stuart, who took it, opening the end and peering inside.

Braxiatel reached out, putting his hand on Stuart's and pressing the envelope closed again. 'Later,' he said.

'What is it?' Benny asked.

'It's Jackson Hart's personal documents. I had them released from the security vault.' Braxiatel turned to Stuart. 'I know how you feel, that you must be yourself and not just a conglomeration of other people's memories. But while you must be yourself, you can never escape their pasts. Jackson Hart is not such a bad person to be, not a bad name to have. It's not a bad point to set out from on your great journey.' He tapped the envelope. 'And there's a running start in there. Rather than being a name with no legal identity, no documented past, why not take one to build on? Make something of the life that Hart never really finished. A life so full of promise.' He smiled. 'It will make things easier, too.'

'Thank you,' Stuart said quietly. 'I'll think about it.'

'Take your time. It must be *your* decision.'

'Thank you,' Stuart repeated. 'I think, for what it's worth, that Hart would have appreciated it too.'

'Good.' Braxiatel took Stuart's hand and shook it. 'With the similarity of Graize's full and dramatic confession, there will be no problem getting a pardon for Hart, clearing his name. Let us know sometime whether that pardon is posthumous or not.'

They sat in silence for a while after Stuart had gone.

'Will he take the name of Jackson Hart, do you think?' Skutloid asked.

Braxiatel shrugged. 'It's up to him.'

'I think he will,' Benny said. 'Like you said, it's a leg up on the ladder of life.' She stood up. 'Thanks for the tea. And everything.' She looked from Braxiatel to Skutloid. 'Thanks to you both. What are you going to do now?'

Braxiatel grinned. 'I think we'll drink a little more tea, talk over old times.'

'Battles won,' Skutloid said. 'And lost.'

'Lost?' Benny asked in mock amazement.



Skutloid's laugh was a dry cough. 'Those will be other people's battles.'

'What about you, Benny?' Braxiatel took her hand. 'Are you all right?'

She nodded. 'Tired more than anything, I guess. I'm going to get some sleep. Then when I've got my breath back, I'm going to experience the original Medusa Effect. You're both welcome to join me.'

Braxiatel frowned. 'The Medusa Effect?'

'Yes,' she said. 'I'm picking up on the classical origins of the real Medusa. As soon as the bar's open, I'm going out to get stoned.'